EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

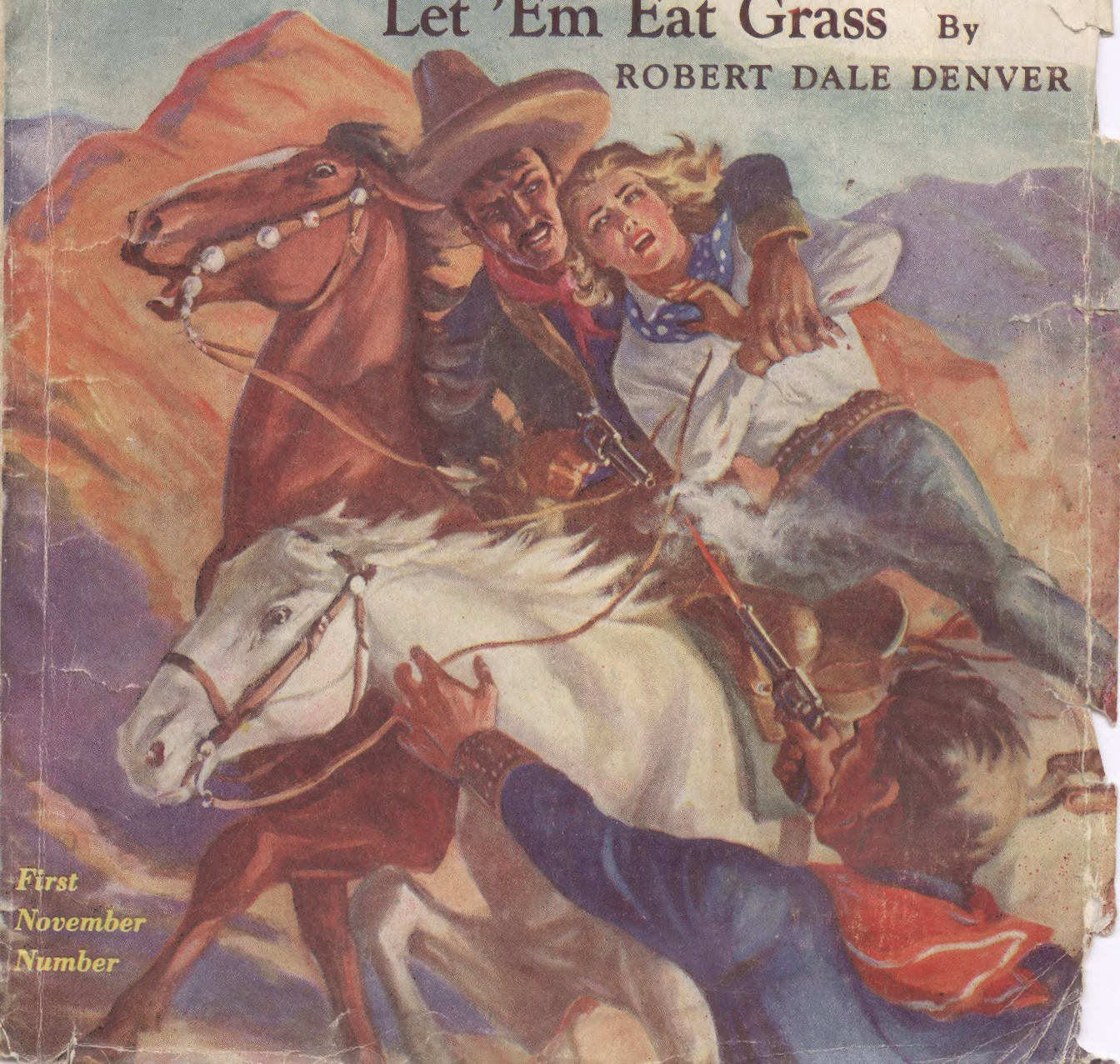
LOVE STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

RANCH ROMANCES

15c

Let 'Em Eat Grass

By ROBERT DALE DENVER



First November Number

A YEAR AGO HE WAS SET TO BE FIRED

... NOW HE'S RIGHT-HAND-MAN TO THE BOSS!

"YES sir," continued Joe, "his desk used to be right next to mine—now look where he is."

Half proudly and half enviously he and Frank watched Ed as he swung down the company steps, his arm linked in that of J.P., the head of the firm. Ed is getting $7,500 a year now, while Joe at $5,000 is a long way ahead of Frank, a newcomer.

"Boy, he must be plenty smart," said Frank.

"Plenty smart is right," said Joe. "Ed has a lot on the ball, but in spite of that he was slated to go."

"For what?" Frank wanted to know. "A guy like that . . ."

"Well, maybe you wouldn't believe it, but it was his breath . . ."

"Drank a lot, eh?"

"Not Ed. Never a drop, but most of the time he had a case of halitosis* that would knock you down."

"One of those birds, eh? Didn't he read the Listerine Antiseptic ads. Didn't anybody tip him off?"

"Sure, I tipped him off, but not before he almost got the toss. You see, Ed had to see an awful lot of people—close contact stuff. At first they never said anything about it, but later on that breath of his was getting him in bad with his customers. Finally a few of the crustier ones began to write in, complaining, and at last J. P. himself got on to it."

"You'd think J.P. would say something . . . a good man like Ed."

"I understand he did, Frank. Maybe he didn't make it plain enough. Anyhow Ed never took a tumble—and his job hanging in the balance."

"Chump!"

"You said it. But there's hundreds like him; suspecting everybody but themselves."

"Well," demanded Frank, "what happened?"

"I got Ed out one night. After a couple of drinks, to give me courage, I let him have the bad news about that breath of his. Told him he better get going on Listerine and keep it up if he wanted to stay on with the firm."

"You certainly didn't pull your punches."

"I certainly didn't. And boy, was he sore at first. And then grateful. Worked my hand up and down like it was a pump handle. Since then you never saw a guy so careful about the impression he makes on others."

Frank nodded. "The last place I worked, they were plenty fussy about that sort of thing. I think every firm should have a standing order 'Listerine Antiseptic before you call on a customer.' I guess it pays."

"And how! If you think it didn't, just look at Ed; he sure is going places."

***Nobody is immune!** Everybody probably has halitosis (bad breath) at some time or other without realizing it. That's the insidious thing about this offensive condition. Sometimes halitosis is due to systemic conditions, but usually and fortunately it is caused, say some authorities, by fermentation of tiny food particles in the mouth. Listerine quickly halts such food fermentation and then overcomes the odors it causes. Your breath becomes sweeter, purer, less likely to offend. Always use Listerine before business and social engagements. Lambert Pharmacal Co., *St. Louis, Mo.*

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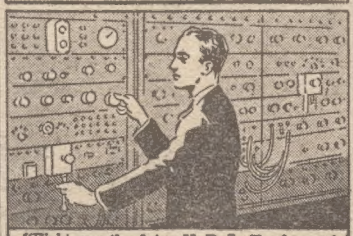
by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

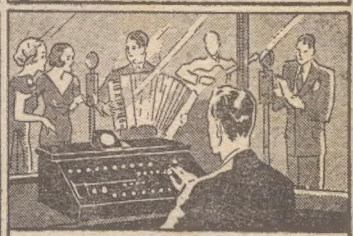
"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."

"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"When I finished training I accepted a job as service man with a radio store. In 3 weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N. R. I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."



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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and service men. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

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RANCH ROMANCES

Vol. LXXXX

No. 1

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In the Second November Number

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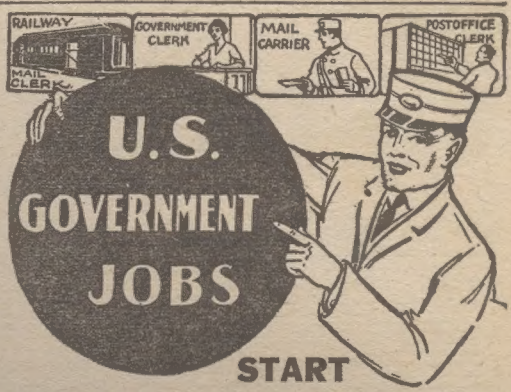

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29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
6.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	2.95	1.35
6.50-17	3.25	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.45
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.45
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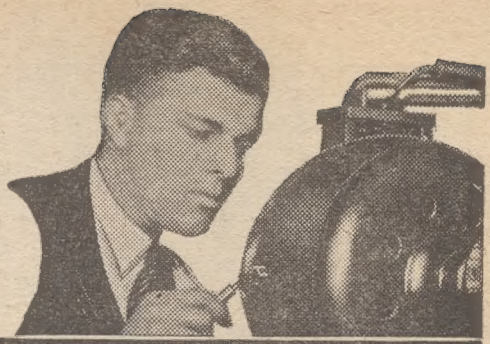

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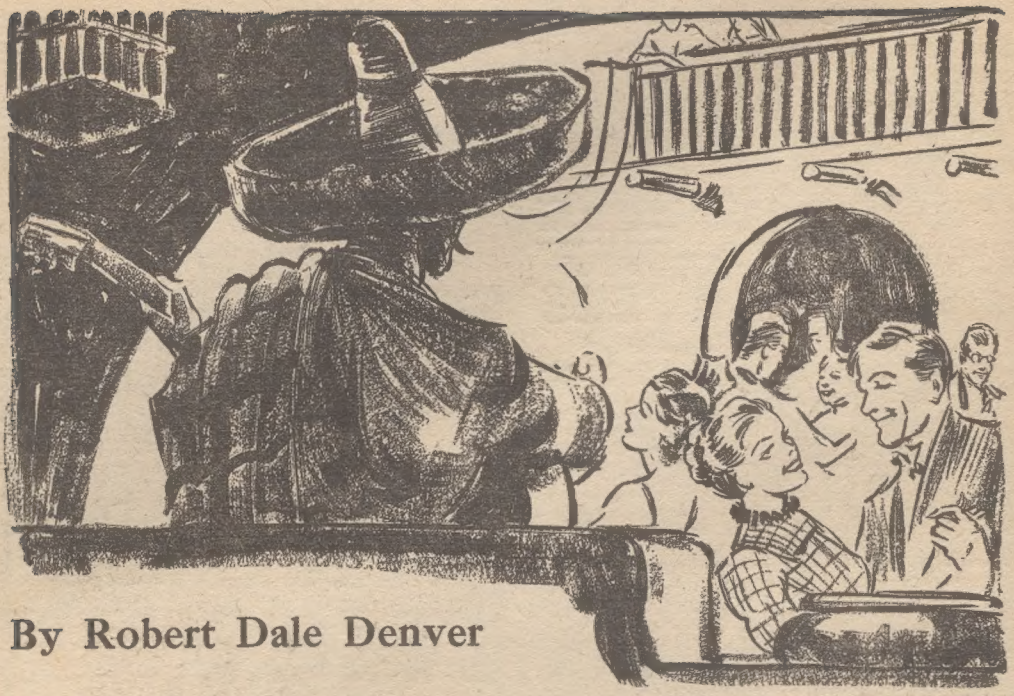


By Robert Dale Denver

Let 'Em Eat Grass

The wonderful old Bear-paws ranch had fallen on evil and decadent days. It was the desperate duty of a stubborn young Scotch waddy to save it from both outside and inside destruction—save it even from itself! And in his heart-breaking job, there was only one person the young waddy didn't rough-ride—the Colonel's aloof and lovely daughter.

CHAPTER I

Bullet Welcome

AS JIM MALCOLM rode down the slope leading his pack horse, again he had the hunch that some rider hidden in the scrub pines of the high ridge was trailing him.

Malcolm frowned a little at the idea, then shrugged off his annoyance. He hadn't expected his camping trip over the Bear-paws cattle ranch to go unobserved, since always he had ridden and camped in the open. Most of the ranch's mountain range was government land and anyone had a right to ride over it, as long as he didn't bother the cattle. Likely it was some cowboy keeping an eye on the stranger.

Drawing up his blocky blue roan cow horse in a clump of brush, he waited, the gray eyes in his lean, craggy face fixed on the comb of pines. There was not so much as a glimpse of horse or rider, but suddenly the swift passage of a beam of light drew his eyes. It came again, aflash across the mountain and valley. As if someone were giving signals with a mirror as had been done in Apache days, by white men to send warning of war parties, by the Indians instead of the shorthand of smoke columns.

The idea of a mirror signal was nonsense, he decided, and rode on, dropping steadily toward the headquarters of the Bear-paws Ranch, a cluster of buildings lying between the two ridges of a canyon mouth. The ridges, bearing an odd resemblance to the forearms and paws of a reclining bear, had given Colonel Tolliver Howe's ranch its name.

The Southwest couldn't show a finer looking ranch headquarters than the the Bear-paws. In style it was much like the huge residence of Mexican haciendas. In the main house, a rectangle of flat roofs capped white-walled adobe rooms, built about the hollow square of a huge courtyard. At one corner of the building a square, squat tower, a watch tower relic from old Indian days, arose above the roof level.

Near the main house a dozen other structures—bunkhouse, stables, sheds, storerooms, corrals, chutes, pens—all with walls glistening milk-white in the glare of the lowering sun, lay in the peaceful shadow of drooping pepper trees and tall cottonwoods.

Jim Malcolm had caught glimpses of the Bear-Paws headquarters from the mountain range where he had been riding for over a week. Always he had looked at the buildings with admiration mingled with the Scotch reservation that enough money had gone into those elaborate structures to pay off the mortgage on the outfit. Buildings like those just about needed a breed of cattle that sprouted 14-carat gold-tipped horns to pay for them. Or mighty smart, careful management.

Riding down into the canyon bottom, he passed a concrete reservoir supplying the ranch with water, and came to a glorified bunkhouse with gay Mexican serape cloth as curtains. Next came a fancy stable where a row of box stalls housed arch-necked thoroughbred horses. More of the same breed of horses were grazing in a level meadow below the house.

In a walled corral he saw some fifteen saddled horses and half a dozen teams hitched to rigs. Evidently the Bear-paws was host to some neighborhood gathering. A sudden clamor of voices and laughter came from the main house.

Heading to put his own horses in the corral, Jim Malcolm halted abruptly. Like most range-raised men, he had little liking for breaking into a group of strangers. Hesitating now, he wondered if he should ride on to make camp again, and return the next day.

Before he could come to a decision, there came startlingly loud the crash of a rifle, repeated twice, sending heavy echoes rolling up canyon. Following this there was a burst of yells rising some distance from the ranch, a queer high-pitched savage chorus. Then a little interval of silence, and all bedlam seemed to burst loose. Guns—rifles, six-shooters, shotguns—began pounding and bellowing in a jagged thunder, part from the roofs of the main house, others booming from some distance away.

Mingling with the shots were yells and a rumble of hoofs. The horses and riders were not in Malcolm's view, but the yelling was undoubtedly the ululant cries of Indian warriors. It was as if time had rolled back to the days when redmen were trying earnestly to wipe out the invading palefaces.

Malcolm stood in his stirrups, but there was nothing to be seen save the back wall of the main house. What in Sam Hill had been turned loose here? The nearest Indian reservation was less than fifty miles away, but the Apaches had been peaceful now for decades. Had a band of renegade bucks returned to the bloody ways of their fathers?

Dismounting, he shoved his horses hurriedly into the corral and, loosening the six-shooter holstered at his hip, started on a run for the main house from which guns were raising an increasingly loud racket.

A wall of adobe bricks some four feet high surrounded the house proper with a wooden gate providing entrance. As Malcolm's hand fumbled at the latch, a

bullet spatted into the gate post, showering pine splinters over his hand. That was too close.

He flung himself behind the wall and, as he dropped, there was a slight tug at his sombrero crown. He put up his hand, but knew before he had touched the hole that a bullet had torn through the hat. Had he been any slower in dropping, and if the sun had not been in the eyes of the marksman, one of the shots would certainly have hit him.

JIM MALCOLM

Judging by the angle, the bullets had come from the square tower that rose from one corner of the rectangle of roofs. Some defender in the tower must have mistaken him for an attacker trying to sneak in at the back of the house. The fool should have known from Malcolm's cowboy garb that the newcomer was no Indian, if the hooting chorus of savage yells really came from Apaches.

Out front the booming guns and strident yells and hammer of unseen hoofs traveled closer. Meeting the charge, the shouts and exploding guns of the defenders on the roof became almost deafening. In the din Malcolm could distinguish the shrill voices of women. Shades of Geronimo and the days when women had helped husbands fight off attacking red hordes!

Squatted behind the wall, he tried to puzzle it out. The attacking group of coppery-skinned warriors would probably be sweeping about the house any instant now. He still had to see one of the combatants, either raiders or defenders, but if he needed any more evidence of the reality of the battle, he had it when on the slope west of the ranch a big white-faced cow, as broad-beamed as a hay wagon, gave an agonized bellow and promptly went down, to lie kicking weakly.

He crawled along the wall for twenty yards and cautiously raised his head to peer over the top. Before him was a portion of a roof and, to his amazement, he saw a blond-haired girl standing above the parapet, holding a carbine. Facing toward the valley beyond the canyon mouth, she flung the carbine to her shoulder and emptied the gun, little puffs of smoke rising from the burned powder. As she fired she shoved back the fawn-colored sombrero she wore and her hair suddenly tumbled in a golden cascade to her shoulders.

The sight all but petrified Malcolm. Where the girl stood she was an easy target for raider bullets. Realization that the girl was in imminent peril made him rise, shouting to her an urgent order to get down. The guns drowned out his voice, and with a foolhardy recklessness, still standing erect, she began reloading the carbine.

A hoarse yell came from Jim Malcolm's throat and, leaping the adobe wall, he started racing for a blue plank door that led into the courtyard. And a bullet came again, and again went wild.

He turned his head toward the tower as he ran, and saw a man in a rusty black sombrero pointing a pistol at him from a square opening of the tower. Next instant he burst through the blue door which carelessly had not been barricaded.

There he was out of reach of the man in the tower, in a patio that was a

paradise of strips of green lawn, flower beds, dwarf evergreens and bushes trimmed in fanciful shapes. In the middle sat a fountain made up of two huge green concrete frogs squared off and squirting water from their mouths at each other.

He gave all this only one quick glance. Along the row of rooms on the front of the house ran a corridor of vine, covered beams resting on log posts. Putting his legs around one of the posts, he clambered agilely to a handhold on a beam, and scrambled up on the roof.

Directly in front of him, on the same section of the roof as the blond girl who was again emptying her carbine, were other people, men and women, all like the girl, with their backs to Malcolm, firing out into the valley, and all garbed variously in costumes of the Old Frontier.

Most striking among them was the commanding figure of a man, well built, tall, with a sharply trimmed beard and white hair that fell to his shoulders. Dressed in a faded gray army uniform and campaign hat, he was waving a cavalry saber.

This, Malcolm guessed, was none other than the well known Colonel Tolliver Howe, owner of the Bear-paws, and called sometimes "the Buffalo Bill of the Southwest." Colonel Tolliver Howe in his long adventurous life had been Indian scout, Confederate officer in the Civil War, a trail driver of Texas cattle herds, buffalo hunter, railroad builder and rancher. On his big Bear-paws Ranch he had welcomed as guests governors, senators, foreign noblemen.

As Malcolm hastened to cross the roof, the oldster scabbarded his saber and, snatching from holster two gold-inlaid six-shooters at his hips, emptied them toward the valley.

The yells and exploding guns of the attacking force were now close and Malcolm, six-shooter in hand, looked over the parapet. He stared popeyed. The oncoming riders were dressed certainly as Indians, clad in ragged breeches and moccasins, their faces and bare chests streaked with paint, but they were white men. Yelling like fiends, firing guns fast, they swirled up close to the front of the house, and then abruptly retreated, brandishing their weapons, racing for the cover of a line of trees fringing a creek.

Dazed, Malcolm stared after them, the unfired six-shooter still in his hand. Then after a moment he turned to look flabbergasted at the people on the roof. They were all cheering, laughing.

Then he noticed that the piles of cartridges near their feet, handy to their reach, were all blanks. He guessed it then. This was a fake battle, a show put on in fun.

A tall, horse-faced man dressed in gambler's garb, who swinging about had noticed Malcolm and his drawn gun, suddenly pointed at him. "Look!" he shouted with a bellow of laughter. "This stranger cowboy thought this was a real battle. He was coming to help us."

All of them, including the extremely pretty, vivacious girl with the tumbled blond hair, turned toward Malcolm. Then one of the older women, dressed in a pair of levis that made her look almost as broad as the cow he had seen beefed on the ridge, called, "Our hero!" and blew him a kiss.

Whereupon they all began to laugh, the men uproariously, the delighted throaty chuckle of the girl sounding distinctly to Malcolm's reddening ears.

"Our sham battle hero!" the girl corrected the woman.

Malcolm put up his fingers to the hole which the bullet had torn entering the crown of his sombrero and pinched the felt to cover the aperture. Maybe it had been a sham battle, but the bullets that had come at him were genuine enough.

Jim Malcolm felt mingled anger—at himself for not having guessed that this was a show, and at these people—the pretty girl, Colonel Howe in his uniform, the horse-faced man in gambler costume who had turned the laugh-

LISSIE HOWE

ter toward him. He felt almost as much anger at them as he did at the unknown in the rusty black sombrero who had fired some very real shots from the tower. He glanced at the tower but saw it was empty of its gunman now, nor was the man in the black sombrero to be seen on the roof.

Colonel Howe came striding up. "What!" he exclaimed. "You, young man, you thought it was a real attack?"

"Yeah, I did, for a fact," he drawled. "I was out in back and didn't see your fake Apaches, but I saw a cow beefed up canyon and figured it must be a real battle." He kept silent about the bullets that had nearly hit him.

"What's that?" squawked the Colonel. "A cow beefed? Who was that blasted careless? We were just celebrating the anniversary of an attack the Apaches made on this ranch years ago. We didn't have enough blanks and I let some of the boys shoot a few real cartridges, tellin' 'em, of co'se, to be careful. Who are you, cowboy?"

"My name is Malcolm," stated the newcomer.

"Ah, yes, Malcolm. I remember now; my good friend, George Haskell of the First Territorial Bank, wrote me some days ago that you would be arriving to look over the ranch."

"Of course," Malcolm said, "my business will wait until tomorrow."

"Yes, it will have to wait," the Colonel said briskly. "Can't let business interfere with pleasure. But meanwhile you will, of co'se, join in our little festivities, Mr. Malcolm. Hobby," he turned to address a slight young fellow of thirty or so, in the beaded buckskin costume of a trapper of Kit Carson's time, "shake hands with Mr. Malcolm. This is Hobby Griscom, general manager of the Bear-paws. Mr. Malcolm, you will recall, Hobby, is the man Mr. Haskell wrote was coming. All our rooms here in the house are filled tonight, but you can see that Malcolm is made comfortable in the bunkhouse."

Then in rapid order he introduced the others on the roof, including the big horse-faced man in the gambler's garb, who was a neighboring rancher, Cass Whitman. Of the names of the rest Malcolm remembered only that of the girl, an easy job since it developed that she was the Colonel's daughter, Lissie.

Hobby took him as far as the door of the patio and halted, waving an indolent hand at the bunkhouse. "You'll find a place there," he said curtly and left.

Hobby plainly had no inclination to play bellboy to the newcomer. The banker, Haskell, had told Malcolm about Hobby Griscom. He was a distant relative of Colonel Howe's; had been made manager when age had retired the Colonel from active range work.

Malcolm, still dazed by the smile Lissie Howe had given him in greeting, went to attend to his horses, feeding them and then putting his bedroll in an empty bunk. Afterwards, instead of joining the party, he made a tour of the yards and buildings. In the back of a dark shed, he found stored away four big gang plows, three disc harrows, two grain drills and at least two dozen heavy work harnesses, all covered with dust. The implements would

account for the huge field below the ranch which, he noticed, had been broken out at one time but had since been left to grow up to weeds.

Wandering about, he ran into the barn man, a garrulous old fellow, "Sooey" Maxon, who had ridden as cowboy for the Bear-paws until a falling horse had crippled him. Sooey, questioned about the field, said that Colonel Howe and Hobby had once had the idea of farming, but had tried it only one season.

"Cowboys didn't take to plowin' crops," said Sooey. "And Hobby he don't take no interest in anything except them thoroughbred horses and poker and this here new game o' polo."

Malcolm couldn't get out of his head the vision of Lissie Howe with her startlingly blue eyes, her flashing smile, her throaty chuckle. When he thought of her he forgot everything, even the hostile shots fired by the man in the rusty black sombrero.

At dusk the Colonel, as became a man of his hospitable reputation, came hunting Malcolm personally to bring him to a barbecue supper being served in the patio. Afterward there was a dance, with music by a Mexican orchestra, in the big living-room.

Malcolm stood ill at ease among so many strangers, watching Lissie Howe dance with one partner after another —Hobby, her father and the tall horse-faced neighbor rancher, Cass Whitman, who was dressed with a finicky neatness as a two-gun gambler, in black broadcloth suit, flowered vest, horseshoe diamond stickpin.

Then a very young girl without a partner came up to ask him if he didn't dance, so pointedly that he swept her out, and progressed from her to other partners. But he never quite got up nerve to ask Lissie Howe. She was something new in Jim Malcolm's serious young life. To be frank about it, she scared him a little; no pair of eyes or smile had ever moved him a tenth as much before. He judged that it would be a lot better for the work he was to do on the Bear-paws if he kept away from her.

CHAPTER II

New Boss of the Bear-paws

THE PARTY celebrating the anniversary of the Apache attack on the Bear-paws lasted most of the night, and it was late in the morning before the ranch stirred to life again.

Long before then Malcolm ate breakfast with the ranch employees, the stable man, a choreman and seven cowboys, the latter all oldish fellows. There was nothing to do then but to wander about restlessly.

He had come here to take a job and he itched to get to work. Before that however he had to have a talk with Colonel Howe. And realizing that the Colonel was a headstrong old geezer, full of fireworks, he knew that the interview was going to be a stormy one.

Saddling his horse, Malcolm rode into the valley below the ranch where dozens of thoroughbred horses kicked up their heels in the level pasture. Looking at the horses, he shook his head a little. Crossing the huge field of weeds which had been plowed up at some time in the past, he dismounted several times to examine the soil and growth of vegetation. It was undoubtedly rich ground.

A few miles away in the valley lay many homesteads and he rode there to inspect the farming operations and to ask innumerable questions.

When he returned the ranch manager, Hobby Griscom, met him. "If you want to see the Colonel, he's in his office," he said surlily.

Malcolm nodded and went with Hobby through the green patio and into a room furnished with rawhide-bottomed chairs, a big walnut desk, a filing case. The walls were hung with silver-decorated bridles, fancy spurs, a silver-encrusted Mexican saddle, a huge ox bow,

pictures of cavalry troops, round-up wagons, lines of unkempt, reckless looking cowboys, and framed letters from prominent people to Colonel Howe. The room looked more like a historical museum than an office.

The white-haired Colonel, looking a little drawn after the strenuous night, greeted him warmly. Another man was in the room with the Colonel, a big fellow, heavy-jawed, swarthy of face, with a rusty black sombrero far back on his head. Malcolm, looking at the hat, identified it as belonging to the man who had peppered him from the watch tower. And looking at the man, he identified the face as the one behind the six-shooter he had seen pointed him.

"Have you met Mr. Zeb Trine, our range foreman?" asked the Colonel.

"No, but I've been wanting to," stated Jim Malcolm grimly and, without offering to shake hands with Trine, sat down.

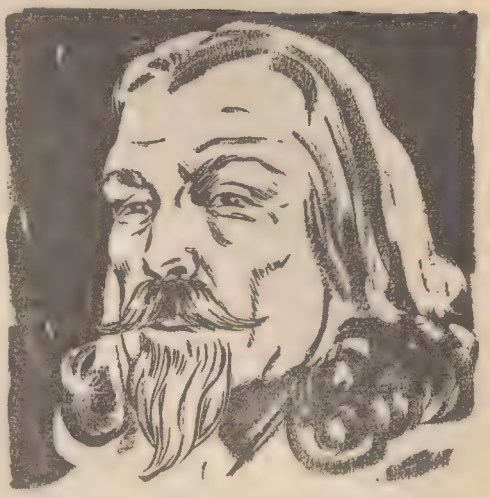
The Colonel began pawing about a disorder of papers on his big desk. "Can't seem to find that letter from Haskell," he remarked. "But as I remember it, he wrote that he was sending you here to take a look over the ranch."

Malcolm did not permit himself even the ghost of a grin. "I think, Colonel, that Mr. Haskell made it a little stronger than that."

"Humph!" grunted the Colonel. "Maybe he did say he thought it a good idea for you to stay with us a few days so you could make a few suggestions about operatin' the outfit. Haskell seemed to think for some reason you were a sort of expert at cattle ranching." He smiled a little scornfully. "Of co'se that would have to be proved to me—raised like I was in a saddle back in Texas. I know a fella young as you has got to put in about thirty mo' years 'fore you'll really learn the cow business. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," stated Malcolm.

"A mere boy," said the Colonel.



COL. TOLLIVER HOWE

"Hobby's thirty-one and still has plenty to learn. Zeb Trine here is forty-five; just the age when he's beginnin' to savvy what it's all about. I've retired from active management, but if you have any notions about cattle ranching, Hobby and Zeb will be glad to hear them. Good morning, sir."

Plainly the interview was over as far as the Colonel was concerned. He had dismissed Malcolm as a not-dry-behind-the-ears kid who should be out on the range roping calves, wrangling horses, learning ranching the way he, the Colonel, had learned it.

Jim Malcolm grinned a little and, settling himself deeper in his chair, began leisurely to roll a cigarette. When he had it lighted, he glanced at Hobby and Trine meaningly. "I take it, sir, I can talk frankly?" he asked Howe.

The Colonel's white eyebrows lifted. "Why not?" he rasped out. "I have no secrets from Zeb or Hobby."

"Fine," drawled Malcolm. "Then there's no need to hem and haw around. It's no secret that the Bear-paws Cattle Company, of which you are president, is in bad financial shape. Haskell's First Territorial Bank has held a mortgage on the outfit for fifteen years. The mortgage has been renewed four times, each time as a larger loan.

The last mortgage is now a year overdue. For four years you haven't paid a cent of interest. The amount due the bank is now nearly twice as large as it was five years ago."

"Cattle prices have been low the last few years," snapped the Colonel irascibly. "Otherwise we'd have paid the interest and made a substantial payment on the principal."

"Statistics," said Malcolm quietly, "show that for the past five years cattle prices have been thirty-two per cent above average. Range conditions in this part of the state, also according to records, have been twenty-three per cent above the average. And yet the ranch has sunk deeper in debt each year."

Howe's eyes, a sparkling electric blue like his daughter's, suddenly flamed with anger. "Well?" he growled. "What about it?"

"According to the agreement you made with Haskell two years ago, if no part of the debt was paid within a year, the bank had the right, if it wished, to take over management of the outfit. Mr. Haskell has asked me now to take charge; to put the ranch on a paying basis. I know I can do it, sir. There's no reason why the ranch should not be a well paying property."

A growl sounded in the Colonel's throat. But he controlled himself except for a scornful snort. "Give over control to you!" he whipped out. "That's ridiculous. I'll go in to see Haskell at once about this. George doesn't mean it seriously."

"I'm afraid he does, Colonel," said Malcolm. "You might as well face the facts. If you can't show that you can start to pay off on this mortgage in a few months, the bank intends to foreclose."

"Foreclose!" This time the Colonel really exploded. "What? Sell me out? Nonsense! Ranch and cattle are worth five times as much as the picayunish loan the bank holds. These buildings cost me well over fifty thousand dollars."

"Expensive buildings don't pay profits," said Malcolm calmly. "You aren't running a hotel. The ranch might be worth half a million dollars as a rich man's toy, as a place to raise fine horses, to play polo. As a cattle ranch, it's been going steadily in the red the last fifteen years. Which on its record means that as a business the Bearpaws is worth mighty little. There are a lot of reasons why it's losing money, but they all boil down to one thing—it's been mismanaged."

The three men, Colonel Howe, Hobby, and Trine, were all looking at him slack-jawed.

"Mismanaged! In what way?" demanded Hobby angrily.

"A lot of ways. Your range is overgrazed in some places; not used at all in others. The ranch needs to be fenced into pastures. There's no system of marketing your cattle. You've got a lot of old steers and dry cows in the mountains that should have been sold long ago, while the grass they're eating should be grazed by young growing cattle.

"This ranch could be carrying twice the stock you've got on it now. Your calf crop has been way below what it should be. Most of your cattle have too far to go to water. About all you do is turn your cows loose and let them manage themselves. It would take me a long time to cover all the things wrong with this ranch."

They had not treated him with even ordinary politeness, and he saw no reason to be tactful with them. All three men were shocked at his blunt speech, although the face of the range foreman, Trine, was an unemotional mask. Hobby was sneering, while the Colonel stared thunderstruck. Then his wrinkled face began to purple.

"So I don't know how to raise cattle!" he bawled.

"I didn't say that," returned Malcolm. "You've raised some fine cattle. What I said is that the ranch isn't paying and never will, run the unbusinesslike way it is now. Things have changed from the old days. Managing

a ranch these times in the Southwest is more than just raising cattle. A ranch nowadays is a sort of beef factory."

"A beef factory!" exploded the Colonel with a world of contempt in his resonant voice. "Good Gad! A beef factory." He started up violently as if to spring on Malcolm, then instead he relaxed and, lying far back in his swivel chair, gave way to laughter. Hobby chimed in, but Zeb Trine frowned darkly. The big swarthy range foreman had little laughter in him.

"Hey, Lissie!" called the Colonel suddenly, glancing out at the door where the girl was trimming some bushes. "Come in and hear this. It's good. You'll want to hear your old relic of a father told he's behind the times as a cattle rancher. A ranch isn't a ranch any more; it's a beef factory."

The girl, her slim person dressed in riding breeches, boots, man's shirt, entered the room to lay an arm affectionately about the Colonel's shoulders.

HOBBY GRISCOM

"Who's telling you that?" she asked. "Not our sham battle hero?" she purred. "Don't pay any attention to him."

Malcolm, who had been coolly enjoying himself talking to the three men, now found himself unaccountably flustered. The girl disturbed him; threw him into confusion. All it took was a glance from her.

"Of co'se I won't," growled the Colonel. "It's still my ranch, by Gad, and I'm saying how it's run. Vamos, you young squirt; I'll go in and talk this over with Haskell."

This outburst from the Colonel brought Malcolm out of the spell Lissie Howe had cast. "I'm sorry, Colonel," he said firmly, "but while it's still your ranch, the agreement you signed gives the bank the privilege of taking over the management. When the loan has been reduced and the outfit put on a paying basis, management will be handed back to you. Mr. Haskell has authorized me to take charge, and I'm doing it—right now. The ranch, of course, remains as your home."

Which enraged the Colonel only the more. "The gall of the whipper-snapper!" he bawled. "Telling me I can live in my own house! And the gall of George Haskell, sending you out here to run my place. I thought George was my friend, but now that I've found him out, I'm through doing business with him. Any bank in this section would be glad to give me a loan to pay him off. Also, I have at least a dozen wealthy friends who will do it. And these big insurance companies out East are now making loans on cattle ranches. All of them will let me run it as I see fit."

Malcolm said nothing to this, but he guessed the Colonel was bluffing. He would find it extremely hard to find anyone to take over the loan. Money was tight.

"By Gad, sending out a—" rumbled the Colonel. "Your name is Malcolm, is it? One of these niggardly, penny-pinching rawboned Scotchmen that you generally find running banks, piling up money in their vaults, squeezing every dollar till it yells for help. I know the kind, because my grandfather was a Scotch sailor who landed in Texas and started ranching. He

died with a Dutch oven full of gold hidden under his bed; too chinchy to spend it. Huh! And Haskell thinks he can bluff me into handing over this ranch to one of this Scotch money-making breed to run just because I signed an agreement! I'll fight him in every court in the country. I'll—"

"Why not," remarked Lissie practically, "since you signed the agreement and the Scotch are so good at saving and making money, give the ranch to him to manage?"

"Give him the Bear-paws to manage! I'll be everlastingly burned in Hades first. You don't mean it, Lissie! Turn the ranch—this ranch—over to him?"

"Sure," said the girl. "It will be only for a short time. You know Mr. Whitman offered to raise the money for you any time. Why make a fuss? This man can't ruin the Bear-paws in a few weeks, no matter how little he knows about ranching."

Colonel Howe growled in his throat again like a bulldog, but in the end he harrumphed and gave in. "I reckon acco'din' to that agreement you can take charge," he admitted grudgingly. "But only until I get another loan, which I'll sure do in jig time. And so you got an idea you can make this ranch pay!"

"I know I can," stated Malcolm firmly.

"Yeah?" put in Hobby Griscom. "Mind spillin' a few of those gold-gatherin' ideas?"

They were smiling, looking on him as a joke, but he grinned back. "I'd enjoy telling you. Since you brought it up that I'm Scotch, one of the best ways to make money is to save it—by cutting down expenses. You've been extravagant here. There's a dozen places on this ranch where money can be saved. One in particular will not only save money, but get us money we need. You've got over a hundred thoroughbred horses here, Colonel. I happen to know where the bunch can be sold for big money right now to an Easterner stocking a fancy horse ranch on the San Pedro. They're just what he wants and he'll pay cash."

"Sell the horses!" It was Lissie Howe's turn to be indignant and her voice fairly crackled with anger. "The thoroughbreds! Why, I've known them all from colts. They'll be sold only over my dead body!"

Jim Malcolm's grin froze. Whew! he'd thought that the Colonel had a temper, but the Colonel was only a kitten and his daughter a tiger cat. No, a hell cat. But she was prettier than ever when she was mad.

"I didn't say all of 'em," he reneged hastily. "Not your personal mounts. But the rest, they've got to go. Their feed comes high, and they're no earthly use as cow ponies on this rough range. This is a cattle ranch, and those thoroughbreds are a wasteful luxury. Besides I'm wanting most of their pasture for another use. I'm going to plow it up and put it in feed—corn, Kaffir, oat hay."

"Farming, hey?" bellowed the Colonel. "Bah! Hobby and me tried farming here one year and found it cheaper to buy the feed from homesteaders. No real cowboy will soil his hands by touching 'em to a plow handle."

"Let him go ahead, Dad," advised Lissie in a choked voice. "Let him sell the horses and plow up good pasture. Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself. Then if you shouldn't get a loan, Haskell will be glad to give the ranch back to you to run."

"All right," agreed the Colonel reluctantly. "I'll give him free rein until Whitman gets that loan through for us. But when I get rid of this bank mortgage, it's going to be the biggest personal pleasure I ever had in my life, suh, to ask you to get off this ranch.

"Meanwhile, suh," went on the Colonel, while Malcolm expected fire to spurt from his nostrils, "go ahead. Buy and sell as you wish, suh, but beware you do it with good judgment and with strict accounting of every cent. Fo' if there is any mismanagement, Haskell's

First Territorial Bank will pay me for it. When a banker sends a mere lad to operate a ranch, he's got to be responsible for any damages. All right; take charge. Now, what do you intend to do first?"

Malcolm's jaw set. "Time's short for spring planting, but the ground on those five hundred acres of land you broke out is still loose enough so it can be seeded to oats after a good disking. I'll set other teams to work, breaking ground. I'll get the mules for work teams from the ones running

ZEB TRINE

wild back on that round mountain on your range. Enough there to plow up a township. The surplus can be sold. We'll need all the money we can get to buy more cattle.

"Now calves are cheap and light up in the droughty Truchas River country, and if we can gather all the old mosshorn stuff you've got running on the mesas, we can run a thousand extra head of yearlings. We'll need to fence off the valley part of the ranch to save it for winter pasture, using the mountain range until fall. With what we can raise in the way of feed, I hope to carry everything through the winter and grain-fatten some of the three-year-olds."

Hobby exploded in jeering laughter. "You fool, you've got ten years of work planned out," he scoffed.

Malcolm flushed angrily. "You're the ones who are the fools!" he snapped. "Maybe you can get another loan; I doubt it. If you don't, we haven't got ten years; we haven't even got one. For, as Mr. Haskell told me, unless the Bear-paws shows that it's on a paying basis by this fall, the bank will be forced to sell you out. By fall, savvy, this ranch has got to be out of the red. You've had years to make it pay and failed; now you've got only a few months. If we get together," he went on earnestly, "work night and day, we can do it."

"A few months," echoed the Colonel, thunderstruck. "You mean Haskell threatens to end us here in the fall—take over the ranch? We'll see, by Gad! If I don't get a loan, I'll fight him through every court in the country before he sells me out. And you figure to make the ranch pay by spending a lot of money on your fool ideas! By Gad, I'll hold the bank responsible for every cent you throw away. Go on; do your damnedest. Meanwhile I'd like to ask only one favor: that you keep the men we've got working here now."

"I'll do that," promised Malcolm. "As long as they do their work. Except for one man that I can get along without. Your range foreman, Zeb Trine."

Malcolm's eyes were on the Colonel, not on Trine. He was wondering if the Colonel had been the one who had asked Trine to fire those shots the day before. It couldn't have been Trine's own idea; it had been someone who didn't want Malcolm taking charge of the ranch, and the man who wanted that the strongest seemed Colonel Howe. Excepting possibly Hobby, who seemed to lack the iron to plot a man's death.

The Colonel looked at Trine and back to Malcolm. "What's the matter with Zeb?" he demanded. "He's a good worker."

"This ranch just doesn't happen to be big enough for the two of us," stated Malcolm. "A little trick he pulled on me yesterday might have been just his way of being playful, but I didn't like it."

His gray eyes turned to Zeb Trine who was glaring at him. The eyes of the two men locked, then Trine hunched his shoulders and got to his feet.

"All right, I'm fired," he stated coolly. "It suits me. I got a better job waitin'—as deputy sheriff in Thatcher. As you say, fella, this ranch ain't big enough for the two of us."

Malcolm got up also. Already he was at work on his job, the task of making over the Bear-paws. There was no time to lose. . . .

At the corrals he found the cowboys preparing to leave with a pack outfit to work mountain range. All, except a wide-shouldered, middle-aged half-breed, were hard-bitten old-timers. He guessed that they would hate him as the others on the ranch hated him, but that wouldn't prevent these cowboys from doing their work well. Loyalty to their outfit rose above dislike of the man that gave them orders.

One of them had to be made foreman in Trine's place; the question was, which? One, Tom Brass, a taciturn, greenish-eyed, short-statured graying old fellow, Jim knew had worked on the ranch the longest of any of the hands. Brass was, as Sooey Maxon had gossiped, a sour-tempered old fellow that an angel couldn't get along with, but he had a good head on his broad shoulders.

He walked over to Brass who was a little apart from the others. "You've worked here the longest of the cowboys, haven't you, Brass?" he remarked.

"And what o' that?" Brass growled in return, his greenish eyes taking a hostile glint. "And what business o' yours how long I rode here?"

"I've taken over the running of this ranch today. Trine is leaving and I need a range boss that can get a lot of work done. I want those mountains cleaned of old stuff. Figure to trap 'em out mostly by fencing off the water."

"That'll take more work than our crew could do in two years," said Brass.

"I'll see that you have plenty of help, if you want to take over the job of range foreman."

Tom Brass scowled. "All right," he growled. "Someone's got to be boss, and it might as well be me. You won't be here long likely, anyway." His greenish eyes rested half contemptuously on Malcolm. "I'm working for the Bear-paws, not for you, and if a corner of your diaper comes unfastened, don't ask me to pin it up for you."

Malcolm nodded and, hiding a grin, walked away. He had picked a good man for the job.

Outside the big bunkhouse he found Trine waiting for him. Deep in Trine's dark eyes burned a baleful glare.

"Someday I'll run you off this ranch," he said thickly. "With a tin can tied to you."

"Anytime at all will suit me for you to try that," returned Malcolm. "But when you raise a gun to fire at me again, you'd better make your aim good, for I'm not going to do any missing myself."

"And the same," snarled Trine, "goes for me. If the sun hadn't been in my eyes yesterday, I'd of—" He broke off, realizing that his anger was giving him away. "And so," he went on sneeringly, "you're goin' to make a barrel of money for the Bear-paws by fall. Why, by fall, you'll be gone from here so long you'll be plumb forgotten."

Their eyes met in a final exchange; then Trine's spurs jingled across the bunkhouse threshold.

Malcolm turned away, forgetting the threats, squaring his shoulders. Ahead of him lay the hardest job he had ever tackled in his life. An impossible job

—to put the Bear-paws on its feet by fall. Maybe even less time, for financial clouds were rolling up and presidents of banks like the First Territorial had to forget friendship and trim sails to weather the storm. Rumors were afloat that the Haskell bank was in trouble.

A hard enough job even if the Howes would help him instead of oppose him. There would be a hundred problems to solve; dozens of adverse situations to contend against, including a possible drought that would ruin his plan for growing field crops. Meanwhile, every minute of the time counted, and already he was throwing himself into the task.

CHAPTER III

Proposal for Lissie

WHENEVER she thought of Jim Malcolm, Lissie Howe seethed with indignation, from the top of her thick blond tresses to the soles of the exceptionally high-heeled boots she liked to wear because they added a little to her height.

The big rawboned sheepherder! The impudent, smart Alecky, knot-headed, big-mouthed buttinsky! The gall of him! With a noggin stuffed with fool notions, thinking that he could teach anything about cattle ranching to her father who had started this big Bear-paws Ranch when the Apaches were pirooting around lifting scalps. At a time when this Jim Malcolm lacked a number of years of being even born.

His taking over the management of the Bear-paws from her father would be plumb ridiculous if it wasn't so tragic. True, her father had retired years before from active work, leaving most of the details to Hobby Griscom. Maybe that had been a mistake. Hobby wasn't overly ambitious, except in wanting to play polo. His only constructive act had been to build the new expensive barn for the thoroughbred horses.

The barn had cost a lot of dinero, but, as to the charge of that big Malcolm goof that the Howes had been extravagant, you couldn't live as they lived back in the days when people had et—not eaten—beef and beans three times a day.

The main house was only big and comfortable, nothing fancy, and Lissie prided herself that she had run it capably and economically since the death of her mother. Only buying new furniture and curtains when needed, and getting along with only old Maria as cook and Maria's husband, Juanito, as handyman.

Extravagant! Maybe this blasted *centavo*-clutching Scotchman thought that cattle ranchers ought to live in a Mexican mud and pole *jacal* and go barefooted.

He wanted economy, did he? Well, oatmeal was cheap and a favorite Scotch food, so she'd see he got served a lot of it—at every meal in one form or another! But that scheme didn't go over so well. He ate very few meals at the ranch or anywhere else; he was too busy to eat.

For Jim Malcolm was driving himself and those who worked with him as if the devil were jabbing him with a pitchfork. Which was foolish, as Lissie saw it, since her father had gone to see the banker, to settle all this nonsense, once and for all. The threat of the foreclosure by fall on the Bear-paws, one of the most famous ranches in the Southwest, was simply ridiculous.

Malcolm however, as busy as a rider on a pitching bronc with both stirrups lost, was working as if every minute counted. And under him the Bear-paws resembled a swarm of bees, with men working like slaves, riders dashing about like mad, night and day, not even stopping for Sunday. Always haste and more haste.

First he had hired a lot of home-

steaders from the valley, and had taken them over to build a trap with huge wings to catch the wild mules on Redondo Mountain. Others were busy repairing machinery and harness, cutting fence posts, stringing barbed wire around the fields that were to be cultivated. And, meanwhile, he wasn't too busy to dicker with the buyer for the thoroughbreds, or to reach an agreement as to price.

Lissie had been counting on the Colonel stopping that sale; either by getting a new loan with the help of Cass Whitman or persuading banker Haskell to relent. Instead, the Colonel and Whitman returned with a report of failure on both counts. So far the Colonel had been unable to get a new loan and Haskell really meant business. He was going to foreclose in the fall if the ranch didn't show that it could return a profit.

"Said he couldn't help it," reported the Colonel as he, his daughter, and Whitman sat in the patio. "He seemed plumb worried about business conditions." Lissie guessed that there had been a bitter quarrel between the two men who had been friends for years.

"I thought Haskell was bluffing, but he wasn't," said the Colonel, as broad-brimmed white hat crammed low, long Havana cigar at a truculent angle, he paced excitedly up and down. "Threatening to sell this ranch over my head, blast him! Which means we can't save the thoroughbreds. Sellin' them hosses is almost the same as sellin' my own children. Wastin' the money they bring to pay interest, and to put in a lot of fool crops! Hirin' hoemen to tear up good pasture, and to cut fence posts, and string these bob-wire fences everywhere to cut up hosses! With the crazy idee of raisin' feed for cattle. We don't need no feed here on ranches in the Southwest. Let 'em eat grass—that's the way I was brought up to raise cattle. If cows can't rustle theirself enough grass and browse to keep from starvin', by Gad, let 'em starve.

"You mark my words!" he went on fiercely. "He'll be plowin' up this courtyard next to put in alfalfa for hog pasture—or into radishes and lettuce and onions!"

He stomped out through the door toward the corrals, slamming it violently behind him.

Cass Whitman inched his chair a little closer to Lissie. Cass Whitman was what most women considered "interesting," although a little too horse-faced to be handsome and, at fifty, there was more than just a tinge of gray in his hair. His past was rather hazy, but it was known that he had been a big-scale gambler in mining camps, and at some other time marshal of a tough cowtown—a grafting marshal, it was reported. Perhaps he had been many other things.

His wife had died years before, leaving him the Big 7 Ranch, purchased in part with a fortune she had inherited. Since then Whitman had added to his holdings, chiefly through money that he lent to smaller outfits, taking the ranches over on foreclosures. He had mixed in politics, too, electing a rubber stamp named Niles as sheriff. A shrewd sort, Whitman.

"I can't blame the Colonel for burning up," he remarked now. "It's an outrage, Haskell sending a young fellow to run this ranch. I've been working hard to get some of my friends to take over the loan, but money is mighty scarce. I think, however, I could raise the amount if I put up my own ranch as additional security."

"But we couldn't ask you to do that!" Lissie exclaimed. She was surprised that Whitman should even mention that possibility. He was not the sort to go to the extreme of tying up his own ranch to help a neighbor. If Whitman ever did any favors for anyone, she had never heard reports of it.

"If I did put up my ranch for security, Lissie, it would be because I wanted to show you to what lengths I'm willing to go for you," he remarked.

"For me?" asked Lissie, astounded.

"Yes, for you." He leaned forward a little, his eyes intent on her face. "You

surely must know that I love you, Lissie. You've grown up almost under my eyes from a child into a woman. A wonderful woman. I want to look after you, Lissie. What better arrangement than to let me get a loan to cover both the Big 7 and the Bear-paws? Your father could be freed from the worry of foreclosure, and the Bear-paws some day would make a splendid headquarters for my ranch—our ranch. The Big 7 and the Bear-paws in one. The finest in the Southwest."

He leaned closer to her, starting to put an arm about her, but she was staring at him in such utter astonishment that he dropped his arm to the back of her chair.

"You—you mean," she stammered, "that you want to marry me?"

He straightened a little. "Is there anything so queer about that?"

She was silent, hesitating to remind him that he was fully thirty years older. That she was a girl with youth before her and he had youth behind him. He should not have to be reminded of that. Wealth and ability to garner it had a way, it was true, of covering up years. But at nineteen she did not want to be married to a man of fifty. Any more than she could conceive why a man of fifty should want to marry a girl young enough to be his daughter, and not necessarily his oldest daughter.

"Surely, Cass," she said in a low voice, "you aren't in earnest?"

"Why not?" he asked, his voice hardening. "Do you know anyone better fitted to be your husband? Any who is able to bring you what I can bring—not only to you, but to your father? To be plain about it, he's in bad shape. The mortgage on this outfit is more than the ranch would bring at auction in these times. I can free the Bear-paws from this bank loan; put off that fool Scotchman."

"But that's like something out of a book," Lissie cried. "Like the squire offering to save the old family homestead if the girl will marry him. But, after all, we haven't been driven off yet."

"You will be," he predicted. "The crazy schemes of this Malcolm will only get the place more deeply into debt. However," he went on, "since this seems such a terrible shock to you, we'll let it all drop for the present." He was deeply offended, she realized, and she was contrite.

"It wasn't a shock," she fibbed. "But it was a surprise. I never dreamed that you— I mean I always looked on you as Dad's friend."

"In his class, eh?" he rasped curtly. "I'm not quite that old yet." He smiled down on her, a thin-lipped smile. "I can wait, Lissie. I have waited for a lot of things, and in the end they always fell to me. I've done my best for you in trying to get you folks a loan, and I failed. I'm not trying to buy you. I hope I've not got so old that I have to buy a wife."

"We are grateful," she said. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Cass. I never thought that you cared for me."

"Suppose you start thinking about it then," he said genially. They heard Hobby's voice in one of the rooms, talking to old Maria, and it seemed to put an idea into Whitman's head. "You've

CASS WHITMAN

never thought about Hobby as a husband?" he asked suddenly.

She shook her head. "No. Nor of anyone else. There seems a lot of time yet for thinking about a husband."

"That leaves a clear field for me then," he said and got to his feet. "Don't forget that I'll be waiting for you," he went on lazily. "And I've never waited very long for anything I wanted, because I go to work getting it. You know, Lissie, I've had a hard life. A lot of fight and trouble. If I thought anyone else might get you, I'd feel like doing something pretty violent. This fellow Malcolm—he's got a lot of force to him. Some girls might fall for him."

Lissie looked up, startled, and suddenly began to laugh in whole-hearted gayety. "Cass," she said, "what has got into you today? If that big lunkhead was the last man on earth, I'd stay single all my life. Have you had a touch of sun?"

He chuckled. "Yes; a touch of sun. Except what I said about you and me."

He went into the house where she could hear him talking to Hobby, and a little later came the sound of cracking ice, from a stored supply hauled down the previous winter from a lake up on a peak. Hobby and Whitman were having a tall drink. Hobby and Whitman were friendly; Hobby often visited the Whitman ranch for prolonged poker sessions that, rumor said, ran into high stakes. Hobby drank a lot, both at the ranch and in the saloons in Thatcher.

From the corrals, as contrast, came the brisk clatter of activity. Malcolm and a crew of men had been busy there all week. They had taken out the drills and plows and disc harrows, and had set up a blacksmith forge to sharpen implements. A score of the wild mules gathered from Redondo Mountain had been brought in and were being broken to harness by "Mormon" Jones, a homesteader who had been made foreman of the farm crew.

Teams were already disking the land in the big field that Hobby and the Colonel had broken several years before, when they'd had a notion to grow their own feed for the thoroughbreds. That afternoon they were starting the first of the big gang plows, turning black furrows around part of what had been the horse pasture.

Lissie wandered out disconsolately. The thoroughbreds had been taken away and, in their place, were wild, unruly mules being broken to harness. Malcolm was there, tall in his big hat and high-heeled boots, doing, with his vast store of strength and energy, the work of two men.

Blackbirds were flocking down to feast on the fat worms turned up by the plow shares. There would be other plows following the first one, tearing up the rich turf. Where grassy pastures had lain in the canyon mouth and in the valley would be fields. All over the ranch, men were at work, building fences, clearing and burning brush, breaking the Bear-paws to hateful harness. The whole ranch would be spoiled.

In the mountains other men were building traps and corrals about creeks and water holes and salt grounds, so that Tom Brass and his cowboy crew could capture the old mosshorn cattle that were to be sold to clear the range for younger stock. Lissie hated it all suddenly. Why couldn't the Bear-paws go along as it had for decades, with cattle wandering where they wanted, unhindered by fences?

She decided not to tell her father that evening of Whitman's offer and her refusal. It would only bother him. That was one sacrifice she would never make to preserve the Bear-paws—marry a man whom she did not love. Not even to save for her father the home of which he was so proud. She would go out and take in washing if necessary, to support him, but she wouldn't marry Cass Whitman.

But it was her father who brought up the subject that night. "What did Whitman have to say to you today?" he asked when they were alone.

"He talked about the loan; that he

couldn't get the money unless he put in his own ranch as security."

"Is that all he mentioned?" the Colonel inquired gently, avoiding her eyes.

Shock came to Lissie suddenly. So the Colonel had known what Whitman was going to ask her and evidently had approved it! Many people accused the Colonel of being a showman on the order of Buffalo Bill Cody, a man who loved the limelight. She realized that was true in part, but she knew also that, at the bottom, he was the very soul of honor and courage, and that the smallest part of her, his only child, was more in his eyes than the Bear-paws, his own life. It hurt her that he could be even thinking that she might marry Whitman.

She ran to him suddenly and put her arms about him. "Dad," she said, "did he tell you that he wanted to marry me?"

"Yes," the Colonel admitted reluctantly. "Or hinted at it. In some ways he would be a good match for you, Lissie. You've been used to a fine house, fine horses, everything you could want. I always hoped to leave you the Bear-paws but, honey, it looks bad for our keeping it. Money is scarcer'n hen's teeth. And if you cared for Cass enough to marry him, it would mean you'd always be on the Bear-paws. Times has changed, like that big clod-hopper of a Malcolm says. It takes a hard-headed man to keep a big ranch afloat. One like Cass Whitman. Couldn't you learn to care for him, Lissie?"

"No," she said flatly. "I couldn't—ever. You quit worrying about me. I'm not afraid of anything that comes. And don't you be."

"I'm not afraid," he stated. "Not for myself anyway. But it's a heap of money we owe, and we don't have long to raise it. Haskell's bank is shaky, they say; if it went under, we'd be sunk. I got to rustle a loan somewhere, mighty pronto." He sighed deeply. "And I will. There's lots of places I ain't asked for money yet."

"Sure," she said cheerfully, and her arms tightened about him. "We'll make it." She realized now that, in favoring the match with Whitman, it had been not through selfishness, but for her sake, fearing that the ranch would be lost before she could inherit it. But surely it wasn't possible that they could lose the Bear-paws!

Left to herself, she looked down into the valley which the full moon was flooding with silver. Across the courtyard in the office was a light, showing Malcolm working at a desk, entering up his books, keeping record of the time the men had put in on various jobs, of money spent. A working fool, that Malcolm, and no clod-hopper as her father called him. The men said he was a top-hand cowboy; he had more than held his own in helping Tom Brass's crew gather mules.

"Doggone him," she muttered petulantly. "Why did he have to come here, disturbing everything, spoiling this ranch, putting worries on Dad?"

It was not his fault, of course, that the bank had put him in as manager, nor that the bank was threatening the Howes with foreclosure, that every month was drawing nearer the day when a sheriff might sell the outfit under the hammer. Nevertheless Jim Malcolm embodied all of that impending disaster.

And also he represented what she and her father both hated—the end of the good old era in the Southwest. The days when turning cattle loose on the range and branding calves, gathering beef, doctoring stock, and watching out for rustlers made up the main requirements of ranching.

CHAPTER IV

Hired Killer

LITERALLY Jim Malcolm kept one eye on the calendar and the other on his watch. If the Bear-paws outfit had been his own, he could not have worked harder or worried more. Always

in his mind was the need for haste and more haste. A hundred things could wreck his plans or handicap him in the race for time.

Long before dawn he was astir; it was only long after dark that he called it a day. He flung into his job all the enormous energy of his big, rugged body, riding like a whirlwind from one work crew to another, toiling alongside the men, trying to shove into high gear in a few months a cattle ranch which for thirty years had been lumbering along like a wooden-wheeled old Mexican *carreta*.

They were done, now, gathering mules on Redondo Mountain. They had made drives netting over three hundred head of mules, wild as cougars and tough as rawhide. Offspring of range mares and Missouri jacks, they averaged around a thousand pounds apiece, a good size for work animals on the ranches and small farms of the Southwest. The surplus animals not needed for the Bear-paws farm work, when Mormon Jones had broken them, brought fancy prices. Along with the mules, a hundred wild horses had been corralled and sold to horse and mule buyers.

By the time the horse and mule drive was ended, a crew of workmen had fenced off the water on the mountain range, forcing a miscellany of wild mountain cattle, old steers, maverick bulls and cows, down into canyons where they had to enter traps. The brush was literally full of old stuff that should have been gathered and sold long before.

Tom Brass and his cowboys brought bunch after bunch into holding pastures where they were sold to buyers. The money from their sale, with that from the mules and horses, went to pay current expenses, labor, feed, seed, fencing. The balance into the purchase of young steers and heifers which were located on the vacated range.

Malcolm found Tom Brass and his crew a hard-riding, willing outfit. The homesteaders he employed for farm work did well under the foremanship of Mormon Jones. And yet there were annoying delays; things went wrong at critical times. Machinery broke down without reason; parts disappeared; jobs were done wrong.

Too many times these happened when the sneering-faced Hobby Griscom had been delegated with responsibility, and Malcolm finally stopped asking Hobby to help in the work. He might as well acknowledge that none of the Howes would help him; that if he won out in his race against time, it would be over their stubborn opposition.

The Colonel was away most of the time, still making frantic efforts to get another loan to rid him of the one of the Haskell bank. Malcolm could overlook Hobby's unwillingness to be useful and the Colonel's attempts to get a new loan. What he did mind, in spite of his best resolutions, was the contempt he saw in the intensely blue eyes of Lissie Howe. The girl looked through or past him with a cool scorn that was both infuriating and disheartening.

"Look here," he said to her one day, "it's your privilege to look at me as if I was just nothing but dirt. But don't forget that, while this is a job to me, what I'm doing here is for the benefit of you folks."

"Oh, I never forgot that," she cooed sweetly. "We all appreciate that you're trying to save the Bear-paws for us. And after you've saved us, we'll put up your statue in the patio in your honor. But just why should it make any difference to you how I look at you?"

He hesitated a moment before answering. Then, "I don't know," he confessed. "I don't see any reason for it myself. I try to tell myself you're just being plain unreasonable, but it bothers me just the same. Your father, Hobby, Tom Brass and the rest of 'em—what they think of me means mighty little. You're the one I'd like to convince that I'm right. I've been hoping to show you that ways of running ranches have changed, just like railways got rid of wood-burner engines. It stands to reason that

there are new ways of doing things on ranches too."

Lissie yawned as an open hint that she didn't give a hoot what bothered him. "I'm willing to be shown," she remarked. "But it's too bad that you're being so abused here, isn't it? Being looked at by a girl as if you were dirt."

Which left him looking foolish, in the class of a peevish, whining kid. He couldn't get anywhere with her. Nor could anybody else, he guessed. A spoiled brat. He had heard that there was nothing more unreasonable on earth than a woman, and he could believe it now.

"All right," he said wearily. "You win. I ought to've kept my mouth shut. But there's times I'd like nothing better than to throw it all up and get away from here. And that's only because of you. You seem to hate me."

"I don't believe in hating anyone," she returned. "Hating someone hurt you more than it does the person you hate. No, all this lather of work you've got this ranch into rather amuses me."

For a few heartbeats she stood looking at him. Malcolm didn't know it, but the girl was finding something compelling about him—a warmth that she had not thought was in the rawboned rider when she had first met him, a force that drew her in spite of herself. More than once lately she thought back to Whitman's remark—that a lot of girls might fall for Malcolm. It had been something then to laugh at. It still was, but the laughter was a little forced.

"The old days of ranching in the Southwest are gone," he said stubbornly. "Just turning cattle loose on the range, rounding up twice a year to brand and to gather beef for shipments—that's not enough. They realized that up north in Colorado and Montana and Wyoming years ago and started to raise feed. No one sees it in this country, but you people have got to see it or go broke."

He didn't know why he stayed facing Lissie's scornful eyes. He wished that he could turn on his heel and go away. He ought to have too much pride to waste time explaining to a spoiled girl that she disturbed him. But he couldn't go away.

More than anything else he wanted to talk to her. To talk with her about herself; but, if that were not possible, about anything. About the four hundred long yearlings he had bought, and which were to be unloaded at Thatcher in two days. About the bumper yields the corn, Kaffir and oat hay were promising if only it would rain. In short, he wanted her to be interested in the things he was trying to do, in the desperate attempt to get the ranch established on a paying basis before the deadline date set by the bank.

But there was no talking with her on these things; between the two was an ugly wall, built mostly of prejudice on her part.

And he wanted to say ungallantly, "To hell with you all," and leave her and the ranch, but to say that wouldn't be the truth. He wanted to stay right here like a dumb fool, hoping that she'd change toward him.

When the days went by, bringing no rain, and the fields began to droop from the continuing drought, he thought he could see in her eyes a triumphant "we-told-you-so" expression.

He could see it in the eyes of others, too; in those of Hobby and neighboring ranchers who dropped in to laugh at the wilting fields and the idea of farming on a cattle ranch.

Another week of hot dry days made the situation more critical. The drought was beginning to affect his carefully planned schedule of work; the oat hay should be cut early enough so the ground could be plowed and planted for winter pastures. The rainfall for the season was far below average, but it didn't help to say that the drought was unusual. He had only one chance to make good here and, if his farm operations failed, his whole plan for the ranch failed.

Discouraged finally by the succession of unending sunny days, restless in Lissie Howe's vicinity, he left headquarters and rode up to join Tom Brass, Bill

Morley, Dell Quessy, Yaqui Smith and the other round-up riders.

Chasing wild cattle over the mountains gave him a chance to forget the stunted corn and oats in the fields below. He was a cowboy, not a farm hand, anyway, and he'd show this outfit that he was one of the best.

Raised on a rugged mountain ranch in Colorado, Jim Malcolm took nobody's dust when it came to riding the brushy slopes. Which was some satisfaction, since he knew that all of the cowboys hated him. Not hating him so much personally, he guessed, but for what he was doing to change the Bear-paws. Excepting perhaps the youngest of the bunch, the breed mixture, Dell Quessy, who plainly had a definite hatred. Where the others pointedly ignored Malcolm, Quessy seemed constantly trying to pick a quarrel with him.

Returning one day from a trip to Thatcher, Quessy brought with him a couple of quarts of whiskey and stayed in camp all next morning, apparently trying to drink it all up.

"Going to get rid of us top hands, eh?" he addressed Malcolm at noon, with a thick drunken speech. "Going to fence in this whole ranch, so you can get a bunch of fifteen-year-old kids to shove cattle around from one pasture to another, is that it?"

"No," said Malcolm. "No matter how well the ranch is fenced, there'll always be a job for mountain cowboys who know cattle and range."

Quessy laughed insultingly. "You needn't be a-lookin' at them clouds hopin' for rain for them crops of yours down there! It ain't a-goin' to rain. It's goin' to keep on burnin' up that fool corn and hay."

Quessy emptied the last of the bottles of whiskey he had brought out. He was in an ugly humor, but Malcolm ignored him. He didn't want to quarrel with any of these men; he was out here to save a ranch. But, as Quessy continued his muttering tirade, anger rose in Malcolm, a desire suddenly to beat the living daylights out of the man. Maybe it came from the tension of the fighting against time he had been making over the weeks, the dire need for rain to save the oats and corn from the devastation the long hot days were causing. And maybe part of it came from memory of the amused, scornful eyes of Lissie Howe.

If it didn't rain pretty soon, there'd be no feed for cattle that winter. The range was getting short, too. Maybe he was destined to fail here, but it wasn't his fault if it didn't rain. He had worked like the devil since he had come, trying to get this ranch on its feet in time to save their jobs for these riders. Why should he take abuse from Quessy or anyone? He had just about reached the end of his patience.

Tom Brass was smoking a cigarette; Yaqui Smith, Bill Morley and the rest were lying back against their bedrolls. They had made a long ride that morning, all but killing their horses in a chase after a bunch of wild cattle that should have been captured and shipped out years before. But Quessy, who had stayed in camp, muttering to himself, eyes bloodshot and malevolent, seemed to be whipping himself into a rage, with the deliberate determination of starting trouble. If so, decided Malcolm, he'd get it.

Malcolm became warily watchful. Changing position with the excuse of lighting his cigarette, when he seated himself again it was to hunker down with his hand close to the six-shooter that happened to be in the pocket of his chaps which he had taken off and flung over his bedroll.

"I don't like your looks, you big dumb Scotty," Quessy said flatly, with his wide lips drawn back from his teeth while his hand played with the butt of his six-shooter. "You ain't nothin' but a damn ignerant squirt—"

Malcolm realized suddenly that the situation was plenty serious. The man, not as drunk as he pretended, was going to force a ruckus. A gun fight. And if Malcolm reached for the six-shooter in his bedroll and beat Quessy to a shot,

Brass and the others could testify, just to get rid of Malcolm, that Quessy had been drunk and maybe unarmed and that Malcolm had started the fight. Which meant being held for murder. But if Quessy beat Malcolm to a shot and killed or crippled him, that also would put an end to his job on the ranch. He wondered, as he had wondered before in the case of Zeb Trine's shooting at him, if Colonel Howe had put the man up to the job.

"S'posin', fella," Malcolm remarked before Quessy could resume his tirade, "before you go on tellin' what you think about me, I just say if you're wantin' a fight, you can get it."

Quessy, his hand on his six-shooter, was a little taken aback by the challenge of an apparently unarmed man. His little eyes squinted at Malcolm's figure, as if making sure that there was no gun hidden on his person.

"Me," he snarled, "I never hankered to go rasslin' or fist-fightin' with a elephant your size. I figure if you don't like what I'm sayin', we'll settle it in a man's way—with guns."

Malcolm grinned a little. "So that's the way you feel about it?" he said grimly. When Malcolm started digging for the gun in the chaps on the bedroll, Quessy figured to empty his forty-five into him.

And still grinning, Malcolm turned as if to grab for the gun in his chaps, but instead launched himself toward the rider. Quessy, on one knee by now, a little cramped by his position, started to bring up his gun. He was fast, no doubt of that. His weapon cleared leather like lightning, and Malcolm could almost feel the rending tear of the slug through his body in the split second it took him to reach Quessy. As it was, Quessy did manage to fire a hasty shot just before Malcolm struck him, a slug that went wild.

Before Quessy could fire again, Malcolm's fist was smashing into the man's jaw. The blow was hard enough to send Quessy toppling to the side, still trying to thumb the hammer of the weapon as he fell. Next instant Malcolm had snatched away the gun and was whirling to see if any of the rest of the crew intended to take up the fight.

No one had stirred, not even to get out of range of bullets. Tom Brass blew cigarette smoke out of his nostrils reflectively. Plainly they were taking no part in it on one side or the other. Killing Malcolm had been Quessy's idea alone.

Without his gun now, Quessy had lost all desire to fight. Malcolm fastened his fingers into the collar of the man's shirt, lifting him to a sitting position, then smashed a hard-knuckled fist into the lean face, knocking him flat on his back.

Yanked to his feet once more, knowing Malcolm was going to hit him again, Quessy suddenly decided to fight—rasslin', fist-fightin' or any other way—rushing to try to jab gouging thumbs into Malcolm's eyes. Deliberately Malcolm pounded him, a merciless beating that made Quessy suddenly beg whiningly—to Malcolm to quit, to Brass and the others to interfere.

When Malcolm knocked him down again and hauled him once more to his feet, Quessy went completely to pieces. "Don't hit me any more!" he begged. "Go beat up the fella that wants to get rid of you. I didn't have nothin' against you personal. It was Hobby. He offered me a coupla of them thoroughbred hosses for puttin' you outa the way."

The man seemed too sincere about it to be lying. Malcolm, recalling the sneering hostile face of Hobby Griscom, and that the young fellow had fought all of the changes, believed the man. Whether the Colonel was mixed up in it, he did not know.

"Too bad, if Hobby did hire you, that he didn't hire some man that wasn't too yellow to squeal on him," Malcolm commented. "Get off this ranch and stay off it," he ordered and turned from Quessy. His anger had found an outlet in battering the man to the point of torture, but he was a little sick now over it. It was, however, better than

putting a slug of lead through the fellow, as he could easily have done.

Leaving the round-up crew without a word, Malcolm, on a fresh horse, headed back to the ranch, wondering if Quessy had lied about Hobby hiring him. Not likely, he guessed, and anger boiled up in him again at Hobby, who still drew the old generous salary from the ranch and did nothing to earn a penny of it, considering himself too good to concern himself with riding range or farm work.

He was sick of the whole Bear-paws layout and the Howes, too. The Colonel and Lissie weren't worth saving. And if Jim Malcolm had not been raised to believe that if a man once started something he should finish it, he would have thrown up the job and let the Howes try to save themselves. There were plenty of other ranches in desperate straits where he could get work. He had built up two ranches before into money-makers, and that record could get him other similar positions.

Hobby he found lounging in the shaded patio, wearing his usual outfit of English riding boots and tailored breeches. As usual also a bottle of whiskey was on a table at his elbow. And at his hip, a holstered six-shooter which Malcolm had never seen Hobby wearing before.

"I want to see you," Malcolm stated curtly. "Outside."

"What about?" asked Hobby, but he got up, his hand on the six-shooter, and followed Malcolm out into one of the stable yards.

"Quessy tried to kill me today up on the mountain," stated Malcolm. "He said you'd hired him to do it."

"He lied!" exclaimed Hobby promptly, too promptly. "What you mean—he tried to kill you?"

"I don't know whether he lied or not," said Malcolm. "I'd beat you half to death, Hobby, if I was sure that he'd told the truth. But you aren't worth skinning my knuckles on. That makes the second time someone has tried to kill me on this ranch. Hobby, whether or not you hired Quessy, you're a low-down polecat that's loafed and laid down on the job the Colonel handed you years ago. You aren't worth the boot leather it would take to kick you off the ranch."

Hobby had been taught to fight when insulted, but his idea of fighting was, like Quessy's, to use a gun. Malcolm smashed him in the jaw hard before Hobby could whip out the six-shooter. Slugged, Hobby, still trying to draw the weapon, backed out of reach of Malcolm's long arms, but not fast enough.

When Malcolm clubbed down on Hobby's forearm, the weapon fell to the ground. After that it was not much of a fist ruckus. Malcolm slammed him hard against an adobe wall three times, and then slugged him to his knees. He didn't want to kill Hobby any more than he had wanted to kill Quessy, but in his blind anger he had to hurt somebody to get the poison out of his system.

"Wait!" whined Hobby as he collapsed in a huddled heap against an adobe wall and put up his arms to protect his face. "Don't take it all out on me. What would I want to kill you for? Maybe there's somebody else behind this. Maybe I was only carryin' out orders."

"Orders?" repeated Malcolm. "Whose?"

"Whose orders would I take?" mumbled Hobby through bloody lips. "The Colonel's. You win. I'll pull out of here."

"That would be a good idea," stated Malcolm. "Same as it was for Zeb Trine. This ranch isn't big enough for you and me either. But I'm thinking you lied about the Colonel."

He heard an exclamation behind him and turned to see Lissie. "Hobby!" she cried and running to kneel beside him, used her scarf to wipe blood from his face.

And then swinging on Malcolm, "Why don't you pick on someone your size?" she demanded furiously. "Why don't you go in for prizefighting, you big brute, if you want to beat up men? And what were you quarreling about?

What was that you said about lying about the Colonel?"

"Nothing important," said Malcolm. She hadn't noticed the gun on the ground, and again, as always when this girl was concerned, he wasn't equal to the situation.

Looking down at Lissie Howe, the fury in him died. This girl thought him a sort of Simon Legree, a bully taking advantage of his size. And he couldn't explain to her; even if Hobby hadn't brought the Colonel's name into the matter. And, of course, she wouldn't have believed him if he had explained.

There was a rumble of thunder overhead and the spatter of big raindrops from the sky. In his anger he had ignored the darkening blanket of clouds.

The sparse huge drops changed abruptly to a beating downpour, and then the sky was sluicing down a torrential cascade on the parched fields. The long drought was broken.

Malcolm sighed with relief. His faith in the feed-growing possibilities of the Bear-paws was justified, but that drought had disrupted his schedule of work. He'd have to speed up more than ever now, drive even harder.

He set his jaw. He'd show these stubborn people on the Bear-paws that he was right. And he'd show the unknown enemy behind the two attempts on his life that he couldn't be shoved out of the road. But he'd have to be on his guard against another blow.

The rain washed away the remains of his anger, and left him wishing numbly that it would wash away likewise the hatred Lissie Howe bore him. For he loved the girl, there was no use trying to fool himself on that.

CHAPTER V

Rustling Charge

COLONEL HOWE was away, and Hobby, refusing to await his return, left the ranch that night, over the protests of Lissie. He was in a terrible rage, was Hobby, but gave no explanation of the quarrel.

Word has a way of getting about a ranch, and it came to headquarters a few days later that Dell Quessy, who had quit the Bear-paws and the country, had confessed that Hobby had hired him to kill Malcolm. Lissie did not believe this report, yet at times she found herself wondering. There was also a vague rumor that Zeb Trine had tried to shoot Malcolm the day he had made his first appearance; had put a bullet hole in Malcolm's hat.

Lissie didn't miss Hobby much. He was agreeable company and he had the same love for good horses that she did, but he hadn't much depth. Since Malcolm had taken charge, Lissie realized that Hobby had many shortcomings as a manager, the chief being laziness. If he had managed better, part of the mortgage would have been paid off, and the bank would not have sent Malcolm to take over.

The big lunkhead still worked as if he were rushing to a fire, and he had the whole ranch rushing with him. He knew only one speed—a gallop. The big steers, cows, bulls were trailed to the railroad, and carloads of young cattle were arriving to take their place in mountain pastures. Brass and his round-up crew were riding themselves down to shadows and, in the fields, the farm hands were working themselves into ghosts.

Under hard rains, the oats, Kaffir and Indian corn shot skyward, as if they, too, saw the urgent need for haste. But Lissie could think only of the sleek-coated thoroughbreds that had lazed in the pastures before the plows had scarred them. Yet she had to admit that thoroughbreds had been only a luxury on a cattle ranch. Hot-blooded horses were no good for working cattle.

"And if one can't have a few luxuries, what's the good of living?" the Colonel demanded as he sat in the buckboard gazing scornfully at the cultivated fields. He had just returned from another money-hunting trip. "When I see those crops and bob-wire fences, I want to get

a rope and string up that blasted Scotch yokel with my own hands."

"Have any luck on the loan?" she asked.

"No," he admitted ruefully. "But I will—before fall. And when I do, what a pleasure it will be to boot him off the premises! Money is gittin' tighter. The only people with any cash to lend is the big life insurance companies out East. And they won't make loans 'less you can show 'em you're making money. I don't know what the country's comin' to. I got to get a loan somewhere. Time's growin' short."

Colonel Tolliver Howe was aging visibly. The lines on his face had been carved a lot deeper by worry. Time, as he said, was growing short; each week brought closer the showdown on the foreclosure.

"Hobby and Malcolm quarreled," said Lissie. "They had a fist fight, and that big bruiser beat up Hobby pretty bad. I don't know what they fought about. He ordered Hobby off the place."

"He did, hey?" bellowed the Colonel. "Sent off a relative of mine? Why, blast him and his gall! Where'd Hobby go?"

"To Thatcher." She did not mention the rumor that Hobby had hired Dell Quessy to kill Malcolm. She didn't believe it.

"No matter," growled the Colonel. "We'll have Hobby back here. Cass Whitman is still working with his friends, trying to get a bunch to take the loan over from the bank. It'll work out some way."

"Maybe," she hazarded, "Haskell will be so pleased with the big yields the oats and corn are making that he will give an extension of time." It came hard to her to say that.

"Humph!" snorted the Colonel. "Bah! Oats and corn! This is a cow ranch. That hayseed of a Malcolm is loco as a rabied coyote. Him and his farming!"

Clear days followed the rains, as if the weather was smiling on Jim Malcolm's farming schemes. The oats was ready to cut, and mowers buzzed all day in the fields. Big Mormon stackers, with huge poles pivoted so they could hoist the piles of cured hay brought in on team-drawn sleds, began building huge stacks near the corrals, where Malcolm planned his winter feeding pens. One towering conical stack after another looked down on the low-walled houses and stables.

The Colonel glowered at the stacks as if they were a personal insult, although as a boy in East Texas the Colonel had hoed corn and cotton, as had most embryo ranchers of his time. For most cowboys and cowmen came from farmer stock only a generation or so back; in the early days of Texas there were cotton and corn plantations before the big cattle ranches.

Following the mowing machines and horse rakes, the gang plows again went into operation, preparing ground for planting wheat and rye which, catching the fall rains, would serve as winter pasture.

Of Malcolm, Lissie caught only occasional glimpses. He was busier than ever, out on the range on round-up, overseeing the fencing and the building of earth tanks to shorten the distance cattle would have to travel to water, or away buying more young steers to fill the ranch to capacity. He pointedly avoided Lissie, appearing in the ranch house only late at night or on Sundays to work on the account books.

It was at noon weeks later that Hobby rode in with his face triumphant. He had pleasant news it developed and, seeing the Colonel, began spilling it without preliminary.

"We're through with that damn Scotchman," he stated. "He'll be in a place where he won't plow up any more horse pastures. Jail's where he's headed. He ought to feel happy there, account he won't be able to spend any money."

"What are you talking about?" asked the Colonel. "Malcolm going to jail?"

"Yeah," chuckled Hobby. "Jail is where the bank cowboy is headed. For stealing cattle. All this buying and selling and trading gave him a swell chance

to get away with some rustling, and he took it. Con Clennan caught him red-handed. Malcolm was marking over Bear-paws cattle with a brand registered in his name up in the Douglas Basin country."

"I can't believe it," snapped the Colonel. "Malcolm is too dumb to be anything but honest. Surely Brass would have known about it if Malcolm had been up to any crookedness."

"He pulled the steal when Tom Brass was on the other side of the range. A couple of hay hands, hired here a couple weeks ago, helped him burn Malcolm's brand on steers he'd bought for the ranch. When he received those steers Malcolm had 'em just hair-branded, so they'd be easy to change over later.

"Last night Clennan picked up some of the cattle when Malcolm's two confederates were slipping them out over the mountains toward the reservation. The pair got away, but Clennan and Deputy Sheriff Trine are going out to arrest Malcolm. Which ends him for good. Clennan and Trine are prepared for trouble, knowing he's a bear cat when it comes to a fight. And now," concluded Hobby, "this ranch can quit being a laughing stock in the country with those haystacks and corn."

There was no reason for the sudden drooping of spirit that came to Lissie Howe as she heard Hobby's news. And her hands, she was surprised to note, were suddenly trembling. She should be glad that he had been caught! Yet it was hard to believe, in spite of all the hostility she felt toward him.

Numbly she heard the Colonel fire rapid questions, asking the details. With a pair of strong binoculars Clennan had watched Malcolm and the two men rebranding a bunch of the cattle. There could be no doubt of Malcolm's guilt.

"Why didn't Clennan ride down and arrest all three when he saw 'em changin' those brands?" asked the Colonel.

"Clennan wanted to wait and follow 'em to see if there were more men in the gang," explained Hobby. "C'mon, Colonel, this calls for a drink in celebration. You ought to go to the bank and make Haskell put us back running the ranch."

Lissie went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, but it sank unaccountably like so much lead to the bottom of her stomach. Twice before, according to the reports, men had tried to put Malcolm out of the way. When the guns had failed, they had tried a cattle-stealing charge.

Suddenly she was sure that the big hard-working cowboy wasn't a cattle thief. It simply wasn't in him. He had his head too full of his job of putting the Bear-paws on a paying basis. Why, he was so plumb sincere that if he had caught himself stealing cattle, he'd have shot himself. And now Trine, as deputy sheriff, and Con Clennan, as cattle inspector, were riding out to arrest him.

Hurrying from the kitchen, she went to the stable to saddle up the fleetest of her string, a blaze-faced bay thoroughbred. Then she rode out to the fields, hunting the farm foreman, Mormon Jones.

"Those two strangers you hired a week or so ago," she said, "what became of them?"

"Guess they quit," he said. "Left without collectin' their time. Just disappeared, two days ago."

"Notice anything suspicious about them?" she asked.

"Well," said Mormon Jones slowly, "besides bein' loafers they sure didn't know much about farm work. Seemed to think a hay-fork handle was jist something to lean against. Neither could even drive a stacker team, and they claimed when I hired 'em they was first class hay hands."

"Did they seem special friends of Malcolm?"

"Friends of his? Huh! Hardly. First time Malcolm laid eyes on 'em, he asked me where I had picked up two such sorry workers; said any pair of kids could do more than them."

Lissie frowned a little. That remark of Malcolm's could, of course, have been intended to drown any suspicion that they were in cahoots with him. But it

was looking more and more like a plain frame-up to her. It wasn't like peppery Con Clennan not to have made an immediate arrest as soon as he had seen the three working over a bunch of Bearpaws cattle. Nothing appealed to Clennan more than catching a gang of thieves at work.

The more she thought of it, the stronger became the fishy smell about the whole affair. It was not impossible that Clennan and Trine intended to see that Malcolm never got to town to defend himself on the rustling charges. Clennan was an efficient inspector, but a mean one, all too ready to use his gun. Two years before he had shot a Swedish homesteader who, Clennan claimed, had resisted arrest. Nothing easier than for Trine and Clennan to say that Malcolm had made a break to escape on the way to town.

"Where did those two come from?" she asked.

"Search me. Strangers to this country. Said they heard in Thatcher we was hirin' men and caught a ride out. One was a mighty good rider; he forked a wild colt bareback one night and stuck like a burr. That was the sandy-haired one, Rake. He was a funny feller; spent three nights on a letter, tearin' it up and rewritin'. Some o' the boys picked up a few torn scraps later and said it was a mighty mushy love letter. So we figgered the letter was to his sweetheart; no man would make all that fuss writing to his wife. Took it into Thatcher hisself to mail it, too; wouldn't trust nobody else with it."

Lissie nodded and, wheeling her horse, suddenly started over the mountain for the part of the range where Tom Brass, Jim Malcolm and the others were working. Their camp would be at Dripping Springs and, if Hobby had left Thatcher at the same time that Clennan and Trine had gone to make the arrest, she had a chance to reach the camp before the pair, who would have to take the long trail about the east end of the mountain range.

After she had the bay warmed up, she set a fast pace, riding at a gallop up canyon, even when the grade climbed steeply toward the pass. Flashing through the pines of the long pass, horse and rider emerged at the head of a steep trail leading down into Dripping Springs. The sure-footed bay drummed along this recklessly.

With her horse a solid blanket of sweat, she caught up with Tom Brass hazing along a little bunch of cattle toward the smoke of a campfire rising lazily through the branches of a pine. At the same time she saw two other men, loping over the ridge into the camp, the smallish Con Clennan and the husky Zeb Trine, with the glitter of a deputy star sparkling on Trine's shirt.

"Hurry, Tom," she told the astonished range foreman. "They've framed Malcolm—on a cattle stealing charge! Clennan and Trine have come out to arrest him."

Brass abandoned the bunch of cattle and spurred his pony behind Lissie's.

"What!" he growled. "That big hunk of bone and gristle steal cattle? Anybody says that is crazy. I hate the bird, but they ain't no cow-stealing streak in his head—just a bunch of wheels turnin' around all day and night on the how of makin' a cow ranch pay off a mortgage."

They thudded over a thick carpet of pine needles to pull up in camp just a little after Clennan and Trine arrived. Malcolm, the first of the crew to reach camp, had been getting dinner. He was kneeling by the fire, a flour sack for an apron.

The cattle inspector, Con Clennan, was a hard-faced man, wiry, small, burned black by sun and wind. He wore a pair of long-barreled Colts belted high on his hips. The swarthy Trine loomed big in his saddle, his thick lips stretched in a grin that showed wolf-like teeth.

The cattle inspector had evidently just informed Malcolm that he was under arrest and what for. Malcolm got to his feet and stood looking at the men, his face with its prominent cheek-bones,

bleak. The news the two brought was definitely a shock.

Cattle stealing in that part of the state was looked on as a serious offense. A man charged with rustling was under a blacker cloud than one charged with murder. In the old days members of a gang of organized rustlers had been hanged for it in these very mountains, Colonel Howe leading a vigilante organization which had finally wiped them out.

It was more serious for Malcolm because he was a stranger in this country, one who had made many enemies and few friends. He must realize that he would stand little or no chance of being cleared in a local court with local men testifying against him.

Malcolm did not seem to see Tom Brass and the girl ride up. "So they cooked up another scheme to get rid of me," he said, his voice hard, cold, his gray eyes fixed on the two officers. "Framed me."

"That's what all cow thieves say!" snapped Clennan. "Raise your paws and keep 'em raised until we git your gun. I've heard you're pretty swift with your fists, and mebbyso with a pistol, too. We're takin' no chances. H'ist them paws—quick!"

Malcolm made no move to obey. He was in no mood to surrender. Becoming a prisoner of the pair meant that he would be at the mercy of Zeb Trine who had once tried deliberately to kill him. And Trine, now with a deputy star on his chest, had every opportunity of doing the job without any legal kickback.

"This cattle-stealing charge against me is a plain dodge to get me off the Bear-paws," Malcolm stated hotly. "To keep from finishing my job. Someone is behind all this, trying to make sure that the Bear-paws goes under this fall."

"Clennan," Lissie put in, "I think he's right. This has all the ear-marks of a dirty frame-up. We've disagreed with Malcolm ever since he took charge of the outfit, but we don't believe in jailing a man under a false charge to get rid of him."

"No one is asking you to step into this," Clennan snarled.

"Nobody had to ask her," said Tom Brass in harsh anger. "She's got a right to say what she thinks, and you'll listen to what she says damn respectful."

"Wantin' to keep your range foreman job, are you?" sneered Trine. "'Fraid I'll get it back again if Malcolm leaves?"

"No," replied Brass. "I aint likin' this job. But I'm not believin' that Malcolm stole any cattle. I can tell a cow thief as far as I can see his dust, and he's not of the breed."

Malcolm had turned and was looking at Lissie and Brass, his face registering amazement. "I thought you two were about the last people in the world that would say a good word for me," he remarked.

Oldish Tom Brass looked uncomfortable. "'Tain't that I'm likin' you none," he said. "It's just that I ain't got the stomach to see a man put out of the way by a dirty trick. You'll have to give up and go to town with 'em, Malcolm. But I'll ride along with the party."

"What the hell for?" demanded Trine quickly. "Figurin' mebbe he won't git there alive?"

"That might be it, Zeb," Brass snapped. "Anyway, I'm goin'."

"And I'll go along too," offered the girl promptly.

"Ain't no need for no parade to take him in," objected Trine. "Your pa wouldn't like it if you rode in to town with a cow thief, Lissie."

"I'll believe he's a cow thief when he's been proved one," she retorted.

"Which won't be hard," snarled Clennan. "We got two of them hair-branded cattle he marked over to prove it. And I saw him do the job t'other day with my own eyes."

The five started out, heading for Thatcher, raising dust steadily until they forded the little stream that ran through the Thatcher valley, coming into town late in the afternoon. Passing through the wide dusty streets lined with Lombardy poplars, they pulled up at the court house, squatting on a square, with

an adobe-walled jail with barred windows at its back.

The old jailer, Lute Merrill, a stove-up former puncher from the Bear-paws, came out to receive the prisoner. There would be no killing of a helpless man while he was in Lute's care.

Lissie and Malcolm as they dismounted were close together.

"Jim," she murmured, using the name unconsciously, "we'll get you out some way. I promise it."

He looked down at her and smiled. "All right," he said. "There's a heap of work to do out on the ranch and I haven't got long to do it, but this grief is plumb worth having you take a personal interest in me."

Lissie blushed a little. "It's not taking any interest in you," she corrected him hastily. "You're working for the Bear-paws, and we always stand by the men, just as they've always stood by us."

But Jim Malcolm, despite that explanation, was still looking unusually happy for a prisoner as, spurs jingling, he passed through the doorway and disappeared in the dark cell corridor.

CHAPTER VI

Lissie Turns Sleuth

LISSIE HOWE looked at the closed door of the jail while Zeb Trine and Clennan rode away. Then she turned to Tom Brass. "What do you think of it?"

"Somebody wants Malcolm out of the way bad. There'll be a hurry-up trial when his case is tried. The jury will take Clennan's word as to what he saw, and there'll be a five-year sentence."

"No!" cried Lissie, choking up a little. "It can't happen that way."

"Things often can plumb happen thataway in this here vale of tears," said Tom Brass. "The law's only just as good as the fellers dishin' it out. No, somebody wanted Malcolm's scalp and has just about got it. They say Trine tried to lift it the first day Malcolm rode in. Quessy tried it in camp. Mebbyso Trine and Clennan figgered to kill him comin' into town, but failin' that, they got him headed for the pen.

"Even if your paw doesn't prosecute, that won't stop the case, not if Clennan has a coupla head of cattle he saw Malcolm burn over with his brand. Those two strangers that Clennan claims helped Malcolm got away, they undoubtedly were in the frame-up—was hired to come in and brand a few of them calves and then pull out. If they hadn't been fakes, that bloodhound of a Clennan right now would be killin' a horse to track 'em down."

"If they were brought back and questioned, it would help," said Lissie practically. "Since Clennan isn't chasing those birds, I think we ought to start a hunt for 'em."

"Not much chance of catchin' 'em. They're likely gone like real birds, leavin' no more trail than a flock of swallers."

"There's one way we might find out where one of them has gone. Mormon Jones said that the sandy-haired one, Rake, spent a lot of time writing a letter and came to town to mail it himself last Saturday. They found some of the scraps of the drafts he tore up and it seemed to be a love letter. If Rake mailed it here in Thatcher, Mrs. Perkins might remember it and where it was addressed. You know her eagle eye."

With this slender hope, Lissie walked briskly down the street to the little post-office. The postmistress at Thatcher was a spry little woman who, it was said, had such powerful vision that she could read through the envelopes that came to the post-office. What she knew, the post-office department, of course, expected her to keep to herself, but what chance has a mere post-office department with a gossipy woman?

Mrs. Perkins' eyes snapped as Lissie told what she had come for. "I certainly do remember that letter that sandy-haired hay hand mailed," she stated

without hesitation. "He come into the post-office once and started to mail it, but when he saw me behind the grill, he only said he wanted to buy some stamps. Then when I crossed the street to the grocery store a little later, he slipped in real shy and dropped it through the slot. Funny how bashful some of these boys is.

"And I certainly do recollect where it went to. And to who. To a Miss Mary Claypool, at Lime Rock. I held it up to the light but the envelope was so thick I couldn't read the writin' inside, but I seen a lot o' 'X's.' Love letter, I'd say. The kind a man writes to a girl 'fore he marries her."

Lissie returned triumphantly to Tom Brass and retailed this news. Miss Mary Claypool of Lime Rock would very likely know where the former hay hand of the Bear-paws was, and might be persuaded to tell. Or maybe Rake had already returned to Lime Rock. If he had been bribed, he'd have money to spend and naturally he'd want to spend it on the girl.

"Particularly since he's not married to her," Lissie remarked cynically. "We're starting right now for Lime Rock. There's no time to lose. Malcolm shouldn't have to stay in jail an unnecessary hour."

"Why not? It ain't such a uncomfortable jail," said Tom Brass. "No rush, and no need your going. I'll head that way tomorrow mornin'. You seem to be taking an all-fired lot o' interest in that feller."

"I've got an interest in seeing that justice is done," Lissie declared loftily. "And besides I want to see him given a chance to carry out his crazy ideas, so the smart Aleck will see for himself that there's a lot he doesn't know about cattle ranching."

"I savvy," said Tom Brass, but he had a knowing glint in his eye that made Lissie color up a little. "Anyway I can handle this myself and, if you insist, I'll start riding tonight."

"Probably stopping for a poker game at every ranch on the way. No, I'm going along! I want to show this big goof that the Howes aren't people that fight crooked."

She sent out a note to the Colonel by a rider that she would be gone for a couple of days, and then she and Tom Brass headed northeast for Lime Rock. They rode until midnight when, reaching the XT Bar Ranch, whose owner was an old friend of the Colonel's, they stopped. Brass was mighty glad to stop. Lissie rode like a feather and there was nothing about a feather to get tired. But nobody had ever accused Tom Brass of being a feather, and the pace Lissie had set had been hard on him.

They were riding again before daylight on a pair of fresh mounts, Tom still protesting that the jail at Thatcher was a very comfortable place considering, and that a few hours more or less in it wouldn't likely injure Jim Malcolm's health none whatever.

Reaching the outskirts of Lime Rock at a little past noon, Brass rode in alone, in the rôle of a cowboy casually drifting across country. An hour of gossip revealed, among less useful information, that Sime Claypool, who had a daughter named Mary, lived on a combination ranch and farm about five miles from town. But there was nothing he could gather as to the identity of the "Rake" who had written her. There were a lot of fellows who were right fond of Mary. Brass rejoined Lissie and they took a trail through timbered country until they looked down on a small ranch house and corrals against the pines, the Claypool place.

Tom Brass was in favor of riding up and asking Mary Claypool what they wanted to know, but Lissie had a hunch, and was in favor of holding back for an hour or so, just watching from the brush. Rake might have warned the girl to say nothing of his trip to the Thatcher country. The hunch seemed strengthened after an oldish man and a boy came out of the house and, walking to a cornfield below the house, began hoeing industriously.

No sooner were they out of sight

than a girl came out of the house and hung out on a line some garments, one a brilliant red dress that stuck out like a bull-fighter's cloak. whereas the other clothes were wet, the dress was dry.

"That's a signal," declared Lissie immediately.

Lissie seemed right about the dress being a signal. A few minutes later a rider came out of the woods opposite and dropped into the clearing. When the girl ran to meet him, the rider put his arms about her and kissed her. The rider undoubtedly was the hay hand, Rake, who by Clennan's declaration had been in cahoots with Malcolm. The two sat down by the windmill and talked, keeping a sharp lookout against the return of the man and boy from the cornfield. Evidently Rake did not stand ace-high with Mary Claypool's papa.

Jake left in half an hour, riding off into the brush again in the same direction from which he had appeared. Tom Brass and Lissie had shifted their position to that spot and, as Rake came riding along unconcernedly, Brass stepped out in front of him, drawn six-shooter in his paw. Rake raised his hands at the old cowboy's brusque command, while Lissie came in to disarm the man.

"What's the idea?" he growled.

"The idea is you're wanted for aidin' and abettin' in a case of cattle stealing," said Brass sternly.

"Me!" exclaimed the man, paling a little. "I didn't steal no cattle. That was only a—" Then he shut up abruptly.

"Only a frame-up, eh?" said Brass. "You got yourself into a worse jam than stealin'. Hirin' out to help jail a man! It's the pen for you, fella."

"I guess not," returned the man. "Nobody is going to arrest me. If they do, I'll tell what I know."

"Which would make it the kind of case that's good for ten or fifteen years behind bars. Conspiracy to put a innocent man in jail, that's what. But if you come back and tell all you know, it can be fixed up so you get off. Miss Howe here will guarantee that. How much did they pay you for your part in that?"

The man hesitated. "Me, I wasn't paid nothin'," he said sullenly. But they noticed that he had a brand-new pair of expensive boots, and when Brass examined the man's wallet, he found over a hundred dollars in it.

"Since when did hay hands ever make that much money in a couple weeks?" Brass asked pointedly.

The man was yellow, Brass figured, because only a yellow dog would go into a scheme to frame a man into jail. "Come on now, who paid you this money?" he growled. "Clennan and who else?"

"I ain't sayin' a word," Rake stated stubbornly.

"Aint you now?" sneered Brass. "All right; when you come dragging back into this country in ten or fifteen years with the jail brand burned on you, your girl will be long married to someone else. Start travelin'—back to Thatcher."

The sandy-haired Rake was plainly scared, but he tried to cover it with a bluff. "You're no officer. What right you got to take me?" he demanded.

"Right o' this gun," snarled Brass. "All the right I need, to bring back a cow thief a cattle inspector swore he saw drivin' off cattle. Try to explain that off when you face a jury."

"All right, I'll go," conceded Rake. "But I ain't talkin'. Not until I see Clennan."

"You'll see him at the jail," bluffed Lissie. "And you'll have a lot of chance to talk to him over a good many years. Maybe they'll make you two cellmates."

"Is Con Clennan arrested?" Rake burst out in high alarm.

"Shore, and the man that hired you, too," said Lissie swiftly.

"N-not him!" stuttered the man. "Why, they wouldn't put him in jail. Not a relative of Colonel Howe's!"

It was Lissie's turn to be taken aback. "Hobby," she murmured. Hobby in this, too! He and Trine in a scheme to ruin Malcolm. Hobby had always seemed too happy-go-lucky a sort to do anything like this. And where had he got the

money to have it done? Hobby was always in debt; horse races and poker saw to that.

"What he's said fits in with what Quessy admitted in camp," stated Brass. "Which makes Hobby pure polecat, even if he is a relation of yours."

"You come back," Lissie told the man, "and tell what you know, and I'll promise that you can get back here to your girl. That might be playing her a dirty trick, but Malcolm has got to be freed. That's all I want. I don't want the Colonel to know what Hobby's been up to. And there's something else. Hobby isn't the principal one behind this. Is it a go?" she asked the man and he gulped and nodded.

"I swear this'll be the last thing I ever get myself into," Rake stated. "I wouldn't of done it 'cept for my girl."

"And that's what Adam gave as an alibi for what happened in the Garden of Eden," stated Lissie.

They rode on, Lissie leading the prisoner's horse and Brass following with a watchful eye on the man. At dark, to make sure that Rake did not run off, they tied him to the saddle and went on, again to reach the XT Bar Ranch around midnight. They slept there, with one of the XT Bar cowboys keeping guard over the prisoner.

Traveling more leisurely the next day, to strengthen the prisoner's wavering decision to tell all, Tom Brass kept harping on all the unpleasant things people could think of doing to a man who tried to frame an innocent man into prison. Hanging was the least of them.

They arranged to reach Thatcher after dark, dropping into it by a back street to pull up at the house of the lawyer who conducted the Colonel's legal business.

Lissie saw the attorney first and, when Rake was brought in, the lawyer listened carefully to the story as Rake reluctantly told it. Clennan and Rake and Hobby, all three, the lawyer declared sternly, should be sent up for ten years for the frame-up attempt. As well as the man that was behind the attempt. For there was someone behind it, a man with money, the lawyer agreed with Lissie. It would have taken a chuck of real cash to interest Con Clennan in the matter, more than Zeb Trine and Hobby could rake up.

Rake insisted, however, that he had no knowledge of this person's identity.

"Some folks," said Lissie, "would guess it to be the Colonel. Which I know isn't true."

When the lawyer suggested that Rake sign a confession, the man began to balk, but only temporarily. Rake was in a jam and knew it. If he confessed his part in the conspiracy in court, Clennan could swear that he had been stealing cattle; that the man was lying. In which case Rake would be sure to be cinched for cow stealing. If he kept still, they would get him for something worse—the framing up of an innocent person. The best way out, as he saw it, was to take Lissie's offer; to give them what they wanted.

The lawyer took down Rake's statement in great detail. That he had been hired by Trine and Hobby to get a job on the ranch, and that Clennan had arranged for Rake and his companion to put Malcolm's old brand on a few calves that had been vented and branded lightly to the Bear-paws mark. That Malcolm's brand had been easy to trace in the state brand book, and that Malcolm had no part in the branding, nor any knowledge of it.

He swore to the attempt, and was then taken to another room while Brass went to bring Hobby and Clennan. Hobby, he learned, had gone to Cass Whitman's ranch, but he found the cattle inspector drinking in a saloon.

Con Clennan put on an air of bravado when shown Rake's confession, but after a noisy half-hour, he surrendered, realizing that the case against him was too strong. He agreed to withdraw his charge of rustling against Malcolm, and along with it wrote out a resignation from his job as inspector in the Thatcher country. After which he said darkly

that there would be someone paying him for all this trouble.

Trine was also in the affair, but they did not bother about him. Sheriff Niles might fire him and might not. And that was the end of a sordid conspiracy to get Malcolm, except that the man behind it all, Lissie was sure, had not been revealed.

Tom Brass yawned. "You better go to stay with Miss Perkins," he said. "Me and Malcolm we got to go back to work, or should I bring him over here to thank you personal?"

"I should say not!" exclaimed Lissie. "I didn't do this for personal reasons. As I told you, I couldnt see him sent up for something he had not done. Don't you even dare to hint to him, Tom Brass, that I was in this. Or hell will be popping in your direction. You take all the credit. And while you're about it, you might drop a word in his ear to look out for an enemy that's likely been causing all this trouble."

"But who?" asked Tom Brass, mystified.

"A man that wants the Bear-paws and what goes with it," she said bitterly. "Cass Whitman! Of course, it's only a guess. He's too slick to show his hand."

"I guess it ain't a bad guess, come to think of it," said Brass. "Huh, that polecat! But it still seems to me you're takin' a lot of interest in a fella who after all is only a stranger. I mean this here Malcolm."

"How many times do I have to explain," demanded Lissie heatedly, "that I only want to see the smart Aleck given a chance to find out he doesn't know everything about ranching? Good night!" she snapped.

Tom Brass scratched his head and grinned and said, "Good night." And, still grinning, he headed for the jail with an order for Malcolm's release. Tom Brass had made an amazing discovery since Malcolm had gotten into trouble—he liked the big lunkhead.

Malcolm had already turned in. "But how—why?" he asked, bewildered. "I don't understand this."

"Fergit it," said Brass. "Never look a gift hoss in the mouth," and added under his breath, "It'd be a heap sight better to kiss the filly."

Then: "C'mon, git them boots on and let's be goin' back to camp," he growled. "We might make a cowhand of you yet."

"Yeah?" said Malcolm. "Why, you old hunk of sun-warped rawhide, you never saw a real cowhand until I came along. You look as peaked as if you'd done a little riding for a change. To show my gratitude, I'll buy you a drink."

"Son," said Tom Brass later at a bar, "you ain't a bad sort, if you'll see the error of your ways. Trouble like this is what happens to cowboys that mixes farmin' with their ranchin'. The hand that throws a lariat simply ain't got no business foolin' with a pitchfork. Even cow critters jist naturally don't like a feller what soils his hands on hoes or forks. All I'm askin' in return for what I done is that, if you stay on at the ranch, you'll never ask me to touch one of them things with steel tines on the end of it."

"All right," said Malcolm, "that's a promise. What became of Miss Howe?"

"Her?" said Tom Brass, yawning. "I guess she's out at the ranch asleep. She sorta lost interest in your case. If you got any words of gratitude to spill, you can spill 'em in my big ears."

"Aw, go to hell," said Malcolm. "C'mon, let's ride; we got cattle to round up and we ought to reach camp in about time to start doin' it."

CHAPTER VII

"Asking for War!"

OU CAN put it down that you've got more than just Trine and Hobby working against you," said Tom Brass as he and Malcolm rode back toward camp. "This cattle rustling frame-up shows Trine and Hobby on top, but below there's somebody else.

Somebody with plenty of money to hire those framin' crooks."

"I've been thinking the same thing myself," said Malcolm. "The natural person to accuse would be the Colonel, but he's out. He wouldn't mix in anything that's dirty, although Hobby accused Howe of ordering him to hire Quessy to kill me. I've been turning it all over, and there's only one man in this community that would have any chance of getting the Bear-paws if the outfit is sold on foreclosure."

He turned in his saddle to look in the moonlight across the valley toward the oblong-shaped mountain where Cass Whitman had his ranch.

"You may of made a good guess," said Brass. "You ain't the only one suspects him. A dangerous man, Whitman. Got the sheriff under his thumb, but outside of that he's quick poison. Lived a tough life—gamblin' and when he went to ranchin' carryin' a long rope and a straight-shootin' gun. He's no polo-playin' sport like Hobby, and no thick-head like Trine. When he gambled they say he allus played for blood—and he still does. Everything he does he goes in to win—any way he can. And that don't go only for ranches. It might go for girls. Married to Lissie Howe, he'd have the Bear-paws."

"It's up to the Howes if they want him to have the ranch through marriage," said Malcolm stiffly. "That's not my business. But it's my job to keep him from getting the ranch on a forced sale."

Tom Brass grinned a little. "You'll likely tell a old fool to button his mouth, but it might be your job to keep Whitman from getting a mighty fine girl too. That girl sure has put the Injun sign on you. You got all the confidence in the world when facin' a gun, or a tough proposition like changin' over this ranch. But when it comes to a girl, you're plumb spooked." His voice carried taunt and Malcolm colored up in the darkness.

He was close to telling Brass to shut up. What Lissie Howe did was no business of the old hand, even if he had worked twenty years for the Bear-paws. But Tom Brass plainly considered it his business, and maybe he was right. Malcolm's frown disappeared. Brass was really trying to help him, hinting that it was up to Malcolm to keep Whitman from getting her. Maybe he had been a coward when it came to facing the challenge of Lissie Howe's eyes. He had been thinking a lot of Lissie's appearance in his defense at camp.

He suspected that she had had more to do with his release than Brass admitted. Not that there was anything personal in that. She had pointed that out in no uncertain way. It had simply been the straight-forward honesty in her that had compelled her to see that a Bear-paws employee got a square deal. That was all. Or was it?

There was enough work on the ranch to keep a man from thinking about the problem a girl raised, he told himself, and he rode furiously for long days on round-up, gathering and moving cattle from droughty range to better grass. That kept him away from headquarters—and Lissie—for a week. After that, he had to return to look after the farming operations and catch up on his books.

Mormon Jones had his crew busy plowing for the winter rye and wheat pastures. The Indian corn was earing out; the Kaffir forming heavy, plump heads. The grassland Malcolm had planted seemed to have been waiting just to show what it could do under a plow. For two weeks, from a few acres of early corn, the headquarters ranch had been feasting on roasting ears, to an extent where Mormon Jones complained that there would be no corn left for the cattle.

The Colonel, Mormon Jones informed Malcolm, every day rode around the fields of tall corn muttering to himself, and it sounded a lot like an admiring mutter. But the Colonel only glared at Malcolm as before. If he felt any pride in the crops Malcolm was growing, it wasn't to be seen in the Colonel's war-

like old eyes. And when at the corrals the Colonel stumbled over a hoe blade and the handle flew up to whack him on the shin, the Colonel swore at the hoe as if it had been a snake which had bit him.

"That's what comes of this blasted notion of yours, suh," he stated to Malcolm heatedly and limped off.

Malcolm guessed that the Howes still classed him with the polecat tribe until he went to the office to make his entries. On opening the books he found the work records and miscellaneous bills already posted, checks ready for his signature, all in a neat writing that he knew must be Lissie's. It looked better than his own scribble, he had to admit, and it meant that he wouldn't have to spend most of Sunday doing bookkeeping.

With a wide smile on his face, he went hunting Lissie, to find her in the kitchen nibbling an ear of corn fresh from a batch Maria, the cook, had just boiled in a kettle.

"I've just seen the books," he said. "I lay awake nights all week thinking of making those entries. We'll put you on salary."

"You will not," Lissie returned promptly. "I've been living on this ranch all my life without doing any useful work. I've got plenty of time."

"If you've any to spare," he remarked, "you might do a little praying for another rain. The corn could stand it. We're below the season average, nearly two inches short, to be exact."

"You and your rainfall averages and cattle price averages!" she said scornfully. "Don't you ever think of anything else?"

The door at the other end of the long kitchen opened and the Colonel stepped in. "Do my eyes deceive me, Maria?" the Colonel asked the cook. "Or is that really a fresh batch of corn?" He halted abruptly, noticing Malcolm in the room.

Then, "Harrumph!" he grunted, and taking an ear of corn, salted and buttered it. "I suppose you've noticed that corn has turned out pretty well. What did I tell you when you first came here? I said land on this ranch, if it had a chance, could produce as good corn as there was in the country."

Lissie chuckled. "Oh, you did not say any such thing, Dad."

"Well, maybe I didn't," admitted the Colonel. "An old man like me is bound to get a little set in his ideas. New tricks come hard for an old dog. But I've been thinking that this grain growing opens up the possibility of grain-fattening our steers so we can ship 'em to top the big markets, instead of selling them as range stuff. People back East demand grain-fed beef, and we might as well give it to 'em. A ranch like this, growing and fattening its own beef, could be a factory. A sort of big beef factory, in a way of speaking. Raising a calf at one end of the ranch, moving him from pasture to pasture until we finish him off at two or three years old in our own feeding pen."

"A beef factory, eh?" said Malcolm, pleased. "That's a mighty smart way of putting it, Colonel. A beef factory."

Lissie chuckled again. "A smart way of putting it," she mocked him. "Yes, wasn't it smart of the Colonel to think of that? You said the very day you took charge here that a modern ranch is a beef factory. And the Colonel almost burst a vein then over the very idea."

A rig had rattled up bearing a visitor, and someone was inquiring for the Colonel. He went out, still gnawing on his ear of corn.

Lissie threw away an empty cob, took a fresh ear and, sitting on a table, swinging her handsome pair of legs, smeared the kernels thickly with butter. Bear-paws butter, for the ranch, since Malcalm had come, was producing its own milk and butter. Malcolm had traded for six dairy cows and, from the cream, Mrs. Mormon Jones, who cooked for the farm crew, churned regularly twice a week. There was also a big garden patch irrigated from the creek and tended in odd moments, from which came all manner of vegetables. Mrs. Mormon Jones had already canned hundreds of quarts of beans and peas.

It's hard for most girls to look pretty while worrying an ear of corn, but for Lissie Howe it was no job at all. The rays of the sun shining through a window set all manner of lights dancing in the tendrils of her hair. And yet, thought Jim Malcolm, she wasn't the sort of woman that has only looks. Her hands were capable and sun-browned from taking care of the flowers and bushes in the patio. And, despite its slimness, there was plain strength in her body. She had been breaking out a bunch of two-year-old thoroughbred colts.

"I've never thanked you for riding into camp just when Trine and Clennan arrived," he remarked. "I was in the mood to do something rash before you and Brass volunteered to go along. I've been wondering ever since just how I got out of jail."

"Why, I presume Tom Brass did it," she said.

"Yes. But I've been figuring that he had some help."

"Oh, Tom is smarter than you think," said Lissie. "But what difference does it make how you got out of jail? You didn't belong there, that was the main thing. You'd better take an ear of corn. You're looking sort of peaked. Been working too hard. There's more to life than just work and worrying about average rainfalls."

"I know that. But maybe," he went on with sudden courage, "I've been working hard so I could keep from thinking just how much more there was to life." Ignoring the suggestion to take an ear of corn, he was looking at her as if that satisfied a kind of hunger in him. "And maybe I've been working, too, so I won't have to work so hard some day. Work you like to do is all right in itself, but it should lead to one thing—making a home."

Her eyes became thoughtful. "Yes," she agreed, "at our age making a home is the big thing. It's in all of us, especially here in the West, for our people came out here in covered wagons to make homes. I've wished that the days when a man and a woman went rolling West in a wagon to find themselves a home in new country weren't over."

"That's all right for a girl that's heir to a ranch as big as this to say," he said. "But what she'll do, of course, is marry some man with a ranch about the same size as hers. You've got everything here already. What could you expect to find in a home in new country?"

"Satisfaction. The fun of knowing that I wouldn't have anything unless I worked to get it. Anyway, it's always been a dream of mine that some day a poor but handsome stranger would come by with a covered wagon, a few head of cattle, a few horses, and an invitation to me to go with him to a new Frontier and the hard work of making a start from scratch. Only I know it's only a dream. That there's no real Frontier left in the West any more—a place where maybe for fifty miles there'd be no other people except Indians. But go ahead; laugh at me if you want to," she added.

He wasn't laughing. For the first time he was getting an understanding of what was in this girl. He had put her down as spoiled, which she was to a degree; but she was real woman, too. The same sort that her pioneer mother and grandmother had been.

"There's still plenty Frontier," he stated. "One doesn't need a covered wagon to travel to it, but it's a Frontier that takes the sort of hard-working people that traveled West in covered wagons. Plenty of pioneering to be done. Take this ranch. It's like a new country when you think of the things that could be done here. I've only made a little start. Enough work left to last a man an ordinary lifetime. And to last his sons their lifetimes too," he added so seriously that she smiled.

"I mean that," he said, flushing a little. "You can see it, can't you, Lissie, that this ranch is unfinished? Your father made the start, but someone else has to go on with making it what it can become, using every acre of it to best advantage. That's the kind of pioneer-

ing that's still to be done in the West, and it's maybe a bigger, tougher job than the Indian-fighters had. They just roughed the West out for us. In some places they spoiled and wasted—by overstocking and plowing up land that shouldn't have been plowed up. It's up to us to find new varieties of grass, new ways of handling cattle and land."

She nodded gravely. "Yes, you're right. Last spring I thought your ideas were loco, but I've changed my mind. The old ranch days—and ways—are over here. The Colonel is realizing it. We made a mistake in fighting you."

Jim Malcolm drew a long breath. "You weren't the only one that made a mistake," he said. "I thought you and your father were crazy, too. We were both wrong."

She smiled at him, and the warmth of her smile made him forget the Bear-paws Ranch and pioneering—to think only of the girl. For months he had been thinking that they were a world apart, and here he was suddenly discovering that they stood on the same ground.

A sudden clump of boots broke the spell. The Colonel was returning to the kitchen and Cass Whitman was with him. The Big 7 Ranch owner was dressed as he often was, in black suit and white "boiled" shirt, garb harking back to his gambler days. The Colonel was pale-faced, as if he had just received news of some disaster.

"Sorry to have to give you folks a shock," said Whitman, after greeting the girl and pointedly ignoring Malcolm. "But word was telegraphed to Thatcher this morning that the First Territorial Bank was closed yesterday. Gone under. And that's not the worst of it. The president, George Haskell, shot and killed himself."

"No!" Lissie exclaimed, stunned. "Mr. Haskell a suicide?"

"Not because he had embezzled any of the bank's money," put in the Colonel. "Just because of discouragement."

"His bank wasn't the only one in the West that has closed its doors in the last few days," stated Whitman. "Cattle prices dropped a dollar a hundred yesterday. There's a panic on. Nine out of ten banks in this part of the West may go under."

Lissie went to the Colonel and put her arms about him. He and George Haskell had been close friends. "Poor George," muttered the Colonel. "He was an honest banker, but too soft-hearted for the bank's own good. He was hard-pressed because he carried too many friends like me along on loans, hoping conditions would turn for the better. I feel that it was his kindness to me and a lot of others that made his bank fail.

"I'm afraid this means the end for us, Lissie. They'll appoint a receiver for the bank now, and his job will be to raise all the cash possible to pay depositors. That means selling off everything the bank holds as security, including the Bear-paws. And there seems no hope of getting a loan to save us."

"Of course I'll do the best I can to help, Colonel," put in Whitman. "But it looks bad. It will be hard to stave off a sale."

"But if the Bear-paws is sold in these times," Lissie protested, "it will be sold for almost nothing. No one with banks failing has money to buy cattle ranches."

Malcolm had said nothing. He felt the loss of Haskell as greatly as the Howes; the banker had trusted management of the Bear-paws to him. And he too knew that it meant the end of the Bear-paws. The Howes would have no chance to pay off the debt, for there would be no time now to fatten cattle, to cash in on his ambitious plans. The Bear-paws would be sold for a song and the Colonel and Lissie turned out of their home. Lissie's dream of loading a few effects into a wagon and hunting new country for a fresh start would come painfully true.

"We'll have to show that we have our courage left if nothing else," the Colonel told Lissie gravely. "We must fight to try to keep the ranch; get money somewhere or try to have the sale delayed. I think my best bet is to go East, to try

to raise the money. I'm taking the evening train to see what I can do. I may be gone for several weeks."

"You'd better consider my offer to let me and some of my friends come in and reorganize the ranch," said Whitman smoothly. "We can raise the money to bid it in very cheaply when it is sold."

"No," said the Colonel positively. "I can't agree to turning the ownership over to strangers."

"But I would be one of the new owners," argued Whitman, "and certainly I'm not a stranger. In fact I've told Lissie that I want to be a relative; that I want to marry her. I'm trying to help you and her both, Colonel, but you won't let me."

"You want to help us on your own terms," said the girl coolly. "Which is, of course, your right, but you bragged to me once that you always get what you go after and that you wanted me and the Bear-paws both. It looks as if you might win—as to the ranch. But not me. I think, Cass, you've really been working against us all along—hoping to get the Bear-paws. You've been our enemy, not our friend."

Whitman smiled at that, but without humor. "Really," he said, "I expected a little more gratitude for what I've done for the Howes. But it teaches me a lesson. After this I'm going to treat you exactly as I've treated everyone else. I'm not going to do you any more favors. You're beaten. And you," he addressed Lissie, "won't be able to see the Colonel put off the Bear-paws. You know it would kill him," he finished brutally.

She flushed angrily and her hand went to the Colonel's arm in quick sympathy. But the Colonel squared his shoulders. "You're wrong, Whitman," he snapped. "It will not kill me. I hope I am still young enough to stand a little misfortune. I'm an old man, but, in name, this is still my ranch, sir, and I've heard enough of your bullying talk. It may not be my ranch long, but while it is, I'm ordering you to get off it and keep off it."

Whitman's smile had vanished and his face became a hard mask. "You're two of a kind," he said. "Too proud and stubborn for your good. All right. You asked for it. When I come back to this ranch, I'll be the one giving the orders as to who stays and leaves here."

Malcolm, embarrassed by this personal talk, had stepped back from the little group, but now he decided to take a hand. "Before you go, Whitman, I'll put in my oar. I've been smelling skunk smell all summer; I'm glad you're out in the open where the stripe along your back can be seen. I wouldn't be far wrong, I reckon, in guessing that you were behind the tries that were made to get rid of me."

Whitman's hand started for the gun he wore, but he did not finish the movement. "I don't like to quarrel in front of a lady," he said. "Not with a plow-hand, anyway. If I ever need a plow-hand, I might give you a job. You've got the strong back and weak mind that kind of work needs. There'll come a time and place to deal with you. Meanwhile," he said, "all of you try to make your fight. I'll guarantee you a hotter time than any of you ever dreamed. You three are asking for war; by Gawd, you're going to get it—from now on!"

Turning, Cass Whitman stomped angrily out of the kitchen to his rig and, as he drove away, they heard the savage lash of his whip laid over the backs of his team.

CHAPTER VIII

Armed Camp

SOON after the Colonel had been driven away to catch a train to the East, disturbing reports recalling Whitman's threat of war began to sift into the Bear-paws. When Cass Whitman threatened war, evidently he meant just that. Not waged openly on his part; but through Zeb Trine, and Con Clennan and, maybe, Hobby Griscom.

The reports were that Zeb Trine and the former cattle inspector were busy hiring gunmen in distant towns. Some of them were the tinhorn kind that hang around saloons, picking up easy money in poker games from unwary cowboys; the rest, wild young fellows who liked to carry a six-shooter and brag about what they could do with it. Neither Trine nor Clennan had any money to hire men, the only answer was Whitman.

To meet this threat Malcolm armed all the men on the ranch, after he had told them that the ranch faced a fight and it was up to each man to decide if he wanted to stay or quit. To a man they stayed.

The cowboys had always carried guns in their work; now, in addition, the farm crew rode cultivators and gang plows with carbines slung on their backs. The stacks of oat hay would be the easiest place for enemies to attack; to prevent raiders from setting them afire some night, Malcolm kept armed guards on watch.

Already the strangers hired by Clennan and Trine were appearing in Thatcher, heavily armed, with plenty of money to spend and no plausible excuse for being there. Malcolm, Brass and Lissie rode into Thatcher to lay a complaint before Sheriff Niles. He shook his head. There had been no hostile act yet against the Bear-paws, he objected.

"And when there is," bawled Tom Brass, "you'll still shake your head on top of your spineless neck. Ever'body knows Cass Whitman got you elected sheriff; ever'body knows you're willin' to lick his boots to pay back the favor."

Which was a lot of satisfaction, but accomplished nothing useful. Nor did it prevent the first shots, fired by marauders from a ridge on the Bear-paws, at Mormon Jones and a group cutting Kaffir. They killed two work mules and retreated while Malcolm, Tom Brass and the cowboys, who were riding close to headquarters and had heard the noise of the guns, raced in to pick up the trail of half a dozen riders heading south. Darkness stopped the tracking, but the trail was taken up again at daylight. It led out on the malpais desert, where no more sign was left than by so many crawling cattle ticks.

Two days later another hail of shots was sent at the gang plow riders. One bullet broke a man's arm. Again the cowboys took the trail, but when it headed for the hard surface of the malpais, Malcolm and Brass suddenly raced back to the ranch, obeying a hunch that they might have been lured away from it for a purpose.

They arrived to find that another group of raiders had gathered a bunch of Bear-paws cattle and stampeded them through the cornfields. This time Malcolm, Brass and the cowboys fell on the marauders, forced them back to the ridge above the ranch where a small battle was waged. Cowboys and farm crew from the fields flung lead busily, and from the top of the main house two guns began to crash. Malcolm grunted. That would be the stable man, Sooey Maxon, and Lissie Howe.

He and Brass and old Yaqui Smith were racing up a little side canyon at top speed, intending to get behind the men on the ridge, when Brass' horse was hit and the rider thrown heavily.

"You hurt?" asked Malcolm, pulling up.

"Hell, no. Go on; smoke 'em out. I'll hit up the ridge afoot."

Malcolm and Yaqui Smith smashed on up the little side canyon and slipped along the ridge top. Getting back of three raiders, they slowly drove the trio down the ridge toward Brass as beaters drive game toward a waiting hunter. But dusk was fighting for the three, who abandoned their horses to hide out in the brush until night shut down. One of the three they found lying face up to the sky, dead; the other two got away. The dead man was a dark-faced Mexican stranger, but Brass muttered to Malcolm that he was sure Hobby Griscom had been one of the escaping pair.

They said nothing to Lissie about Hobby. Nobody but a polecat would

fight against the ranch that had been home to him for most of his life.

They took the dead man into town and delivered him to the sheriff's office. And again the official wagged his head and promised weakly to investigate.

Malcolm by this time was seeing red. He was on the point of riding over and having it out with Whitman man to man, but Brass talked him out of it. Whitman would give him no chance; have his men shoot Malcolm down as he rode up to the ranch. Cass wasn't the kind to give a man a fair chance. Tom Brass suggested, instead, that all the cowboys ride over and carry the war to Whitman's front yard. Malcolm turned down that suggestion. Fighting in defense of your ranch was one thing; carrying war to a neighboring ranch was another. Whitman could claim that he had no connection with the guerrillas raiding the Bear-paws.

The sheriff came out; looked wisely at tracks and gave his opinion. Since the dead man happened to be a Mexican, he opined that renegade rustlers from below the Border had been looking for cattle to steal.

There was nothing to do but quit the farm work and, maintaining an armed camp, wait for Whitman's next attack. The whole thing had Malcolm and Lissie puzzled. Why would Whitman start an expensive turmoil which meant, at worst, only annoyance to the Bear-paws?

But when a mounted messenger from the livery stable at Thatcher brought out a telegram to Lissie, Whitman's tactics suddenly began to make sense. The wire was from the Colonel and stated that he was on his way West, bringing a Mr. Somerset from the big Eastern States Life Insurance Company to pass on a loan for the Bear-paws. Everything should be made ready, the Colonel advised, to give Mr. Somerset a favorable impression.

"Favorable impression!" exclaimed Lissie. "With a range war going on? Men being shot and killed; raiders firing down on the ranch. Fat chance. Whitman started this to keep anyone from making a loan on the ranch."

"We still got time to ride over there and carry a little war to him 'fore this tenderfoot lopes in," said Tom Brass, but Lissie shook her head.

"And get all of you shot up! You don't know how many men they've got hired. No, we'll meet the Colonel and Mr. Somerset at the station with a fast team and hustle him in here to look over the ranch and hustle him out again. Maybe we can do it so quick he won't hear of any trouble. We'll make him think this is the most peaceful place he ever heard of. A South Sea island with the ocean gently kissing the coral strand will have nothing on the Bear-paws for quiet."

"It might work at that," admitted Brass. "You can leave it to the Colonel's silver tongue to fill this tenderfoot with soothin' talk and good whiskey, so he'll feel a million dollars would be a plumb safe loan on the property."

"Exactly," said Lissie, her eyes dancing. "Leave it to the Colonel."

"And the Colonel's daughter," put in Malcolm teasingly. "I guess you won't be any handicap in getting a loan, Lissie. A pair of slickers, both you Howes."

Three days later the Colonel arrived in the buckboard with his guest. Mr. Lionel Somerset, despite his rather impressive name; turned out to be an unimpressive little gray-headed fellow with a meek manner and mild voice. It was astonishing to think that a large insurance company would send a queer little duck like that out with authority to pass on a big loan. But he was nevertheless a likable sort. Lissie would have liked him even if he hadn't had the power to throw a life saver in the shape of a cash loan to the Bear-paws.

It was plain from the start that he'd have no chance of refusing to make a loan. The Colonel and Lissie made a team that Malcolm was willing to bet could have engineered a loan on a ranch on the moon. Lissie and old Maria had a lunch on Mexican tables in the patio, with Maria's husband dressed to play

the part of the finest-damn-looking *caballero* in all Mexico, and ready to plunk a guitar in lieu of an orchestra.

From the roofs about the patio hung gay Saltillo serapes. Strings of red chiles, suspended on walls everywhere, added dashes of color to all the buildings, a whole acre of chile having been picked and strung. The stable and corral yards had been swept with brooms. With its white walls, the Bear-paws looked like the honorable ancient hacienda of a wealthy Spanish don. Even the fields looked their best. The corn was turning color; the Kaffir stretched in heavy-headed rows. The huge haystacks loomed impressively.

The Bear-paws headquarters would have made one swell stage setting. And never were there more picturesque looking cowboys than Tom Brass, Jim Malcolm, Yaqui Smith and the others, in gaudy silk neckerchiefs and shirts, riding their fanciest mounts.

After lunch the Colonel persuaded Lissie to sing a few Spanish songs in a voice which was much softer than those of the rather shrill *señorita* singers across the Rio Grande. Voice, songs and girl impressed Mr Lionel Somerset; they would have impressed a stone statue.

"And I'd been afraid," observed Somerset as he digested his meal, "that the West had lost all its picturesque color. All my life I've been wanting to visit the West and this is exactly as I had dreamed that it might be. And I imagine that you still occasionally hear the crash of six-shooters and rifles in deadly combat."

"Now, now, Mr. Somerset," said the Colonel with a tolerant chuckle, "you're not asking that seriously? You must have been reading of Billy the Kid and Wild Bill and cattle wars. Those were in the old violent days of the West. On a modern ranch like this—"

"But there are still regions where men settle differences without resort to law?" interrupted Mr. Somerset.

Father and daughter exchanged quick glances. Maybe Somerset was already suspicious. Lissie was thinking of the dead horse that had been dragged into an arroyo and buried that morning, killed by a shot that had come off a ridge the night before.

"I must confess," said the Colonel, "that there may still be a few little flare-ups now and then. But taking the West as a whole, nothing to compare with your Eastern cities, where people are constantly being held up by footpads and bank messengers are being shot down. I can't remember even a train robbery around here for twenty years. If we weren't peaceful, we wouldn't have the gall to ask your company to make us a loan."

"That's right, of course," chuckled Mr. Somerset. "My company can make loans only where there is law and order. But even today you must have occasional stock rustling, eh? Times when your cowboys engage in gun battles with lawless riders?" He was eying the Colonel closely.

"Here?" exclaimed the Colonel. "On the Bear-paws? Gun battles? On this ranch where everything is as peaceful as a wedding morn? I almost wish I could say 'yes,' Somerset. That's the trouble with the West these days—too peaceful. No excitement to stir the blood of an old war horse like me. Sometimes I feel like starting a little trouble with my neighbors just to vary the monotony."

"How about range wars?" asked Somerset. "I remember a few years ago the papers were full of quite a lively one in Montana. Six or seven men killed."

"Ah, Montana," chuckled the Colonel. "A rough, uncouth, uncivilized so't of place. Yes, they would likely have a range war in Montana. But when men wear guns down here, it is only to shoot an occasional skulkin' coyote."

And to get his guest's mind off the subject of range wars, the Colonel launched into a thrilling yarn of a buffalo hunt near Dodge City, and from that progressed to a running battle between buffalo hunters and Comanches.

Somerset listened with rapt attention

while the Colonel strewed corpses about recklessly, lingering to describe the death of some particularly brave young man. Lissie, although she knew that the yarn was pure fiction, had to wipe a couple of tears from her eyes. The Colonel had rare acting ability; could make his listeners believe for the time being the most terrific whoppers.

Two cowboys appeared, bringing in a bunch of the finest two-year-old white-face steers that they had been able to gather on the ranch, stringing them out for the Easterner's inspection.

"Fine cattle," Somerset exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. He had been raised on a New York farm upstate, he declared, and he knew beef cattle.

"Yes," said the Colonel, "and when we feed them that hay and corn and Kaffir fodder, they'll top any market in the country. You see, suh, what we have here is not just a ranch but a beef factory. We figured we were losing profits by shipping out cattle off half finished, suh, just as a buggy factory would lose by shipping off its vehicles without wheels. Right on this ranch we have thousands of acres of fine farming land just crying for a plow. By raising corn and Kaffir and oat hay, we can turn out twice as many cattle as we have been doing. That's modern-day ranching, suh," said the Colonel proudly, "the way I worked it out here with the help of Mr. Malcolm, my young—ahem!—assistant."

The stableman strolled by and shoved his hat around his head, which was a sign that a mirror signal sent by Jim Malcolm from the mountain had reported that Bear-paws Canyon was clear of enemies and safe to take Somerset along it.

Somerset, who had bought a pair of high-heeled boots and a hat so big that he was almost completely lost under it, was put on a good-looking gentle horse. After Lissie had tied his neckerchief for him, Mr. Somerset pictured himself as a dashing companion of Billy the Kid.

Accompanied by the Colonel and Lissie as guides, he rode up the canyon, climbing into the big pines. Where the pass divided the mountain range into east and west slopes, they halted for a look at the panorama of distant river valley and even more distant mountain ranges.

"Magnificent," declared Mr. Lionel Somerset with unbounded enthusiasm. "I feel like a new man breathing this air. You know, I had a boyish dream once of becoming a cowboy. If I had not entered the insurance business, I might have come West and turned into a rancher. That would have been in the days when the West was tough, of course. You are sure that those old days are vanished?"

"Absolutely," the Colonel said firmly. "This part of the West is tamed down to where if a cowboy so much as let out a wild-soundin' yip, half a dozen deputy sheriffs would leap on him and shush him up."

"Wham!" The explosion came from the canyon beyond the pass, and was followed by two more heavy *"Whams!"* The Colonel looked at Lissie and she looked back at him. He could see and she could see two men apparently riding desperately toward cover on the slope far below. More shots sounded and the speed of the two horsemen increased.

"Guns?" said Mr. Somerset, picking up his ears with interest, and trying to look past Lissie, who had quickly spurred her horse to his side to make an effective screen.

The Colonel yawned widely. "Prospectors lettin' off a few sticks of dynamite," he said.

"I'm almost sure those were gunshots," said Somerset stubbornly.

"Ah, yes, the boys did say there was a stock-killing bear on this side of the mountain. And that they might get on his trail."

"Bear!" exclaimed Mr. Somerset, excited. "A bear hunt, eh? Do you suppose that we could join it?"

"Not a chance," said the Colonel regretfully. "Those shots were miles away

and bears travel very fast, and always in the direction away from where you happen to be. Maybe tomorrow we could arrange a hunt. But I forgot; I've positively got to go on into town. You and I will come back to the ranch next week, Mr. Somerset, after you have made your decision on the loan, which I hope will be favorable. You have seen what sort of modern ranch we have here," he went on.

They had to get Somerset out of here and into a town at once—before he smelled trouble. He still was trying to see the bear hunt and insisting that he would like to ride to join it.

Lissie came to the rescue. "I feel tired," she confessed, hastily turning her horse homeward. "I really would like to go home. You two men go on. I hate to be a spoil-sport."

"No, of course not," said Somerset gallantly. "We couldn't think of leaving you. As for myself, I feel that I could ride on for hours and hours."

"Men have such extraordinary stamina," Lissie flattered him and spurred her horse into a lope. Behind them the guns were breaking out again, and the yells of men echoed faintly.

"Sounds close to me," said Somerset, swiveling in his saddle to look back.

"Sound fools you up here," said the Colonel. "Ordinary talk carries for miles in this thin mountain air. A gun in the next county sounds as if it were in your backyard."

Lissie looked anxious as the guns kept up. That was a real fight, and Malcolm and Brass, who were trying to keep the mountain clear of hostile riders, were in it.

"Sounds almost like a battle," stated the insurance man as they loped back through the pass. "As if two parties of men were firing at one another."

"Yes, it does for a fact," agreed the Colonel. "Reminds me of one time back in Texas when I was a young lad," and skilfully he started a bloodthirsty yarn.

The shots became fainter as they dropped back down the canyon. But the two conspirators failed in one particular, an important one. Somerset insisted on staying overnight at the ranch and he wouldn't budge on that point. If the Colonel had to go into town that night, he, Lionel Somerset, didn't; and he would follow the next day. He was not going to be cheated out of spending the night on a real cow ranch. The Colonel gave in.

Back at the ranch, while the guest soaked in a hot bath calculated to prevent soreness from the ride, Lissie, giving a final look over the supper table, saw Malcolm appear in the patio. She ran to him at once.

"No one was hurt?" she asked.

"Hell busted loose!" he said, not answering her question. "Ran into twenty men riding up the other side of the mountain. We could hardly hold them back."

"Impossible!" Lissie laughed tremulously. "Why, this is a peaceful country. At least we've got to make Somerset think it is, even if these ranch buildings are burned over our heads."

"Where's the Colonel? I've got to see him."

She clutched his arm. "What happened, Jim? You look as if something did happen—something bad. Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes. One man. We're bringing him in here. Someone that used to be on the ranch—close to you and your father—Hobby. He was with Whitman, but he left the outfit to ride to join us, and Whitman's bunch shot him. He escaped and brought us a warning—that Whitman knows Somerset is here and why, and his force is planning an attack on us tonight—here at headquarters! They've already got us surrounded."

"But why?" she asked.

"To throw a scare into Somerset; make him turn down the loan. And if Somerset should be hit by a bullet, that would make it sure that no insurance company would loan a penny on this ranch. Back East this Southwest has a bad reputation for violence—stagecoach and train robberies."

"Was Hobby badly hurt?"

Malcolm nodded. "Yes. Pretty bad. He's lost a lot of blood. He talked a lot before he became unconscious; held back nothing. Said that Whitman had had a hold on him through gambling debts and a check that Hobby forged. But Hobby turned against Whitman when it came to an attack on you people here, the ranch itself—that's in his favor. Better stuff that Easterner's ears with cotton and put him to bed with a shot of morphine. I've put the men digging a trench to protect our haystacks, all but that small one we left down in the field. But it looks all off for that loan."

"It'll have to be all off then," she said resignedly. "This was a shabby sort of trick anyway, to try to pull the wool over his eyes and keep from him the fact that we're in trouble. As far as danger goes, we might as well be living back in the days when Apaches were raiding and burning."

Her voice broke suddenly. "That's the truth of it. You men are in as much danger as Dad was in the old days. More. The Apaches didn't have modern arms and the army was in here to help fight them. There's no help against this mob—from the sheriff least of all."

She was close to hysteria, Lissie Howe, who usually was so calm, and he stepped close to her. "Stop it, Lissie," he ordered. "It's not that bad. We'll be keeping under cover."

"But it's not right that you and the rest should have to fight for us. You especially, Jim. You've risked your life for the Bear-paws ever since you came here." She was crying a little and his arms were suddenly about her, holding her close. And astonishingly she didn't try to get out of them; instead she put her head against his shoulder.

"Lissie," he murmured, "you'd care if I were hurt?"

"Of course, you goose," her voice came mufflledly. "I don't care about losing the ranch. I don't want to risk losing you—I mean have you run the risk of being hurt."

Yes, certainly she was a little hysterical, Jim Malcolm thought confusedly as he held her close, soothing her. She was actually crying.

"What's become of that girl who told me once that she wanted to go in a covered wagon into Frontier Indian country?" he reminded her gently.

Lissie forced a smile through her tears. "She's turned out to have a yellow streak, Jim. But there ought to be hang ropes for Cass Whitman and Trine and Clennan. If they're not murderers before the night is over, it won't be their fault."

"Likely they'll just try to burn the stacks and some of the buildings, if all they want is to throw a scare into Somerset. But maybe, as Hobby told us, it may be the real thing—a battle to wipe some of us out. It's a big stake Whitman is gambling for—the Bear-paws. And gambling for you, too," he went on. "As if you were a stack of chips to be raked in by the man that holds the highest cards. He can't have you! I want you, Lissie. I loved you from the time I first saw you. But I never had the nerve to think that you'd ever be in my arms."

"But it does seem that I am in them," she said with a flash of her old self. "And I don't even remember how I got there. I hope I wasn't shameless enough to force myself into them. I wish, Jim, we could load up that wagon tonight and travel to that Frontier country. Away from this."

"No, you don't wish that," he contradicted her. "You're not the running kind."

His arms tightened about her; his lips touched hers, and made danger seem a small, remote thing.

"I've been wondering how long it would be before you kissed me, Jim," she murmured. "You're not afraid of men or guns or big jobs, but you've been a little afraid of me, now haven't you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I've been a little afraid, but I believe I'm getting over that."

His second kiss, thought Lissie,

showed—very definitely—that he wasn't just bragging.

CHAPTER IX

Night Battle

HOBBY, pale from loss of blood, unconscious, was put in his old bedroom, and the Colonel, who was a surgeon that compared favorably with most small-town doctors, probed for and extracted the bullet from Hobby's side. He was plainly in a bad way, and needed the services of a doctor but, with the ranch under siege, there was no hope of bringing one out or of taking him to one.

Lissie and the Colonel ate with their guest while the darkness shut down. The Howes had little appetite, thinking of Hobby and the coming trouble.

He was somewhat of a showman, Colonel Howe, but that was only on the surface.

"Somerset," he said abruptly, "I've been lying to you. There is gun trouble in the country, a heap of it. Staged by a scoundrelly outfit of men that, we have word, are planning to attack this ranch tonight. You'd best keep away from windows. I'd try to get you to town, but they're undoubtedly waiting to ambush anyone that rides out of here."

Lionel Somerset's face showed no great astonishment. The Howes guessed that he had not been entirely fooled about the battle he had heard up on the mountain.

"I wouldn't want to leave if I could," he said cheerfully. "I've read a lot of books about trouble in the West and I wouldn't mind seeing some of it first hand. Now what's causing this trouble? Sheep?"

The Colonel told him. Cass Whitman simply wanted the Bear-paws and was determined to have it. The Colonel said nothing about Whitman wanting Lissie also, but Somerset guessed that for himself. He nodded his head repeatedly and puffed furiously on his cigar. And when the Colonel rose to go to the corrals, Somerset went along, carrying a carbine. . . .

Whitman seemed in no hurry to start battle. But at midnight, when stars and moon were blanketed by clouds, a group of his men rode in on horseback, boiling up out of the deep creek channel, charging straight for the big oat haystacks near the corrals.

The ranch employees opened fire at once, and rifle shots rolled between the ridges that were like the enfolding paws of a huge bear. The riders did not venture to come close, but promptly wheeled to drop into the channel again.

The crews had been divided into four groups. The Colonel had taken command of the north side of the ranch headquarters, a line running from the reservoir to the stacks; Brass had the east. Mormon Jones captained a line facing the open valley; Malcolm the buildings and stacks on the west. It made at best a thin defense about the big headquarters, considering that Whitman would be able to mass his men at any one point.

Lissie, with the carbine with which she had hunted deer, was on the roof of the house. Mr. Somerset, filled with pleasurable anticipation of excitement, was at her side.

Their first attack beaten back, the raiders, surrounding the ranch, poured in a hot fire from every direction of the compass, sending bullets spatting against the sides of the buildings, smashing glass in windows.

A few minutes later a sudden flare of light came from a field where sat one small isolated stack of hay. The flames built up high but, as they do when a stack is set afire, died soon afterward to a slow steady consuming of the pile of hay.

Listening to the thunder of the guns, Lissie Howe's taut nerves stretched even more tightly. It was an improbable, crazy state of affairs here—this battle between a score of men on each side. Things like that no longer occurred, but it was happening here. And

the man who had engineered it all had already won. For Somerset, as interested in the battle as a boy, had regretfully told the Howes that his insurance company couldn't consider investing its funds in a ranch where mass gun battles were still fought.

There was no way out; they would lose the ranch. And desperately she wanted to keep it, not so much for her father's sake as for Jim Malcolm's, so he could go on with the work he had started. He it was who was being robbed here—of his chance to show what he could do.

During a lull in the fighting she went to visit the wounded Hobby. Old Maria had been watching by his bedside. Hobby, still unconscious, was steadily sinking.

"He ees bad boy," murmured Maria who had always been fond of Hobby. "Always he was bad. But he come home. He be good boy now," she added with unconscious irony.

Lissie nodded, her eyes tear-filled. Hobby was weak rather than bad. Wanting things the easy way. But in the end he had ridden to warn them, defying Whitman, Trine and Clennan. If they got their hands on him, they would finish him to keep him from spilling what he knew. Aware that Hobby had been brought to the ranch, Whitman would have another reason for attack now. Burning the ranch even Whitman might consider none too large a price to pay to silence Hobby forever.

The main body of attackers were moving to the back of the house, opening fire from cover of the bank of the creek. Hastily men were moved to the house roof as defense, the Colonel, Tom Brass and Malcolm with them. Lissie and Somerset went up also, Somerset breathing hard with excitement.

Men were making pretenses at rushes, to cover the stealthy approach of other parties, but they were driven back. Then, without warning, there came the same loud hammer of hoofs they had heard the preceding spring during the imitation of the Apache attack on the Colonel's old ranch. Only this charge was in deadly earnest.

Yelling, guns booming loud, the horsemen came on. To meet them, weapons flamed from the parapet which the Colonel had built about his roof in old Indian days. From the dimly seen mass came a yell of pain from a rider and the sudden trumpeting of horses in agony. But the others swept in close under the walls of the house where the guns could not easily reach them, and circled to come in at the back of the patio.

Dismounting, they made a rush to break in through the patio gate, well barricaded by Malcolm against just such an attack.

Lissie, kneeling behind the parapet, could distinguish the Colonel's shrill yip among the yells of the men. Somerset was shouting hoarsely as he fired beside her, and she emptied her carbine and reloaded hastily. Then Jim Malcolm crossed to shove her down roughly out of range of the bullets the six-shooters were sending from the outer wall. For a few moments guns and yells made a harsh dissonance, then the attackers broke and fled, to retreat to the brush along the creek.

They stayed there, sending repeated bursts of shots, shouting threats.

Lissie heard Somerset groaning a little as he fumbled to reload his rifle and, knowing he was hurt, called to her father and Malcolm. They helped the insurance man against his protests into a room below. Examination proved that the Easterner had only a bloody slash across his forehead to mark the passing of a bullet that had done nothing more than partially stun him.

"It came within an ace of getting him," remarked the Colonel. "Anyway," he added grimly, "he'll have something to tell back East about the Wild West—if he ever gets back."

Malcolm's face was bloody where a bullet had ripped the cheek. The Colonel was limping, but not from a shot. He had tripped in the darkness and fallen on the roof, wrenching his knee. The accident had not improved his temper.

"If this was in the old days," he raged, "there'd be decent men to get together and round up this crew of devils and string 'em up. But in these times, we depend on law and order, and this is the result. Maybe if I got word to the governor, he'd send in the militia. In the old days we was our own militia. Lissie, you stay off that roof after this or I'll turn you over my knee! Better get a hospital fixed up here; we're liable to need it."

After that, he and Malcolm prepared to go out where the guns were again sounding off furiously. Lissie caught Malcolm's arm as he turned to leave and his hand closed over hers.

"You'll stay below?" he asked. "Promise."

"I promise," she said. "And you—don't take any chances, none of you. This ranch isn't worth the loss of one life. The outfit's gone anyway. They've ruined any chance we had of getting a loan and keep the Bear-paws. The Colonel and I will be packing. We'll all be packing. And you would have made the Bear-paws such a good ranch, Jim."

"Yes, but there's plenty of other ranches to be built up. Room for me somewhere. What hurts is seeing you folks forced to leave your home, losing it to a skunk like Whitman. If the law doesn't stomp down on him for this, someone else has got to do it. The Colonel's right; in the old days, decent men would have organized a lynch party for his kind."

He kissed her and left her with Somerset, who insisted that he was all right and went out to join the others. The guns of Whitman's army burst out sporadically, sending showers of wild bullets, to die away to a few popping guns. For minutes that dragged into hours they kept up their fire, as if to hold the ranch in terror.

Malcolm, Tom Brass and four of the cowboys slipped out for a counterattack on the men back of the house. After that the raiders gave up the idea of a rush on the house and moved to concentrate on the stacks and corrals.

Meanwhile, Hobby Griscom was steadily sinking, still in a stupor from which the Colonel was unable to arouse him. His breathing, which had been labored, turned easier, and then suddenly, as the Colonel and Lissie watched him, he gave a gusty, shuddering sigh and simply stopped breathing. The Colonel stared at him for a long moment, while in Lissie's eyes tears welled and flowed down her cheeks.

"He's gone," said the Colonel slowly. "Some internal bleeding. It's not for us to judge him. He rode to warn us at the last, Lissie, and died for the attempt. We must not forget that."

Sadly the Colonel shut the door on the darkened room and on the man he had raised from boyhood with the same generous love that he would have shown his own son.

A wind had sprung up and was sweeping with increasing force from the west. Making it more than probable that if the battery of big haystacks could be set afire, at least part of the ranch buildings would also be burned. Setting such a fire would seem a short-sighted move for Whitman since he expected to get the Bear-paws, unless he figured that burned buildings would enable him to buy in the ranch at sheriff's sale for a lower price.

The effort, at any rate, was made. The stacks themselves were too well defended to be reached by an incendiary, but some member of Whitman's force got the idea of setting fire to a small tinder-dry frame shed not far from the stacks and lying between two outposts of Whitman's men. Near enough for a rock, with a light line attached, to be thrown from one group of Whitman's force to another group lying in a small wash. A heavier rope, made of spliced lariats, was attached to the lighter one, making a strong line stretching between the groups and lying within a few feet of the shed.

Next, in the wash, men fastened a dead cedar tree to one end of the rope, and men on the other end, after the tree was ignited, hastily pulled the blazing cedar toward the shed.

The defenders, from whom all these preparations had been cloaked by darkness, realized instantly what would happen. If the shed caught, enough sparks would be sent up to catch one of the stacks. They were paralyzed for a moment, then Jim Malcolm brought out a jack-knife from his pocket and opening it, prepared for a dash to cut the rope.

"Hold on!" bawled the Colonel as he caught Malcolm's arm. "Don't try that. Their guns'd knock you down sure."

Malcolm shook him off. "Got to be done," he said, but someone with more strength than the Colonel caught Malcolm from the back and hurled him from his feet. The oldster, Tom Brass.

"Age before beauty!" bellowed Tom. "Let a old-style cowpuncher show you how it's done!" And before Malcolm could get to his feet again, Tom Brass was scissoring his bowed legs across the open space toward the moving line of spliced lariats.

At his appearance, revealed by the faint glow of the blazing moving tree, Whitman's men opened fire. Brass staggered once, but kept on to fall on the rope that was dragging the tree, sawing and hacking at it desperately with a knife. As the line parted, the tree stopped, still a safe distance from the shed, but Brass lay on the ground, a crumpled hulk.

Seeing his plight, there came from the watching Bear-paws men a hoarse yell. There was no need for Malcolm to urge them to follow him as he raced out. As one man, cowboys and farm workers rushed from cover, running straight toward the guns that were still firing on the helpless man.

The boldness of that attack shocked the Whitman group. Those who were caught with guns empty turned and fled; the rest, unwilling to stand the flail of lead being flung at them by the charging men, followed.

Malcolm reaching Tom Brass, shouldered the heavy body of the cowboy, and carried the man back to cover where, with a cot for stretcher, he was taken to the house.

There they found that he had been hit three times, in the thigh, in the back, while a third bullet had smashed an arm so badly that his roping days were plainly ended. The Colonel dared not touch the bullet imbedded in Brass's back close to the spinal column. That was a job for a real doctor, and there was one in Thatcher, the Dutch-born surgeon, Jan Ruysdal.

The failure of their attempt to burn part of the ranch and the approach of daylight, both apparently discouraged the attackers. In the gray light that was slowly succeeding the darkness, they were seen riding away. Maybe they had received word in some way that Hobby Griscom had died and was no longer a possible court witness.

"Tom's got to be rushed to town," declared the Colonel. "Only chance he has to live is for that Holland doctor to operate."

Malcolm looked down at the unconscious man who had shoved him back to run out in Malcolm's place, taking the bullets that would have thudded into Malcolm's body.

"Whether you pull through or not, Tom," he muttered, "they're going to pay for this."

"If he dies, it's murder," raged the Colonel. "Cold-blooded murder. No matter who pulled the triggers, it was that black-hearted scoundrel, Cass Whitman, who fired those guns."

Hastily they hitched up a team and lifted Brass to the mattress-padded bottom of a spring wagon, the easiest riding vehicle on the ranch. Sooey Maxon took his place as driver. Somerset, the Colonel and Lissie were to follow in the buckboard with a few riders as guards.

The Colonel's face was as dark as a thundercloud. Tom Brass had probably given his life for the Bear-paws. He represented the men who had worked faithfully for Colonel Howe from Apache days. Men who had counted the Bear-paws as their outfit, to whom the Bear-paws was something more than just a cattle ranch. For it they had fought Indians, rustlers, had been crip-

pled or even killed riding its steep slopes.

As they prepared to drive away, the Colonel and Lissie turned to look back at the ranch and its bullet-pitted buildings. Below in the field the stack of hay still burned smolderingly. A dead saddled horse lay on the bank of the creek; two more lay near the house. But they didn't see these evidences of the night's battle; what they saw was the old Bear-paws Ranch, and the long procession of brave men like Tom Brass who had ridden for it.

"I am an old man," mumbled the Colonel to no one in particular. "But I am not without my resources."

Lissie's hand closed on his arm. Yes, he was an old man, she realized. When the Colonel had been in his prime Cass Whitman would never have dared outrage the ranch as he had done last night. Then the Colonel had been a fighting man of the old days, of the breed who, when the law failed them, went out to make their own law. Now he was old, weary, beaten down, the spirit of fight still strong in him but the sheer physical strength to back that spirit vanished.

Lissie suddenly noticed as the rigs rolled on that Jim Malcolm was not with the little cavalcade that was to accompany them; nor could she see him in the group remaining at the ranch.

CHAPTER X

Sixgun Showdown

JIM MALCOLM watched the rigs roll away, raising dust on the road to Thatcher. Taking Tom Brass to a doctor in the hope of saving his life. Tom Brass who had shoved Malcolm back and had run out to cut the rope and save the Bear-paws Ranch from flames. Tom Brass who had given his life maybe for Jim Malcolm. Shot down by the hired guns of a polecat.

In Malcolm, thinking of that, worked a powerful yeast of anger. There was, as he saw it, only one way to repay the debt he owed Tom Brass. That way was to kill Cass Whitman. A dangerous thing to try, for Whitman was a gunman, and Jim Malcolm wasn't.

He set out on a long-legged brown horse, through a gap in the ridge above the Bear-paws, taking a last look at the ranch as he topped out. The Howes were done there and he also was done. In panicky times like this, the Bear-paws gun battle had ruined hope of a loan for the Howes. Reports of that night of warfare would be spread in headlines across every newspaper in the Southwest. Echoes of it would be sounding for years to come.

So he took his farewell of the Bear-paws where he had worked and planned for long months. That was past now. There remained only one job for Jim Malcolm—to avenge the shooting of Tom Brass. Never before had Malcolm believed that there was ever any need to go beyond the law to settle anything. He had been wrong. Cass Whitman would never be touched by the law, at most would have to go through the farce of a trial. He could deny all knowledge of the attacking men, who would now leave the country, scatter and disappear. And if those who had employed them were traced, it would lead only to Trine and Clennan, leaving Whitman's skirts clear.

Steadily he rode toward Whitman's Big 7 Ranch which he had never had occasion to visit, although its headquarters on the oblong mountain could be dimly seen from the Bear paws range.

A white frame two-story house, he found, dominated the cluster of buildings and corrals. As he looked about, the place seemed like Cass Whitman himself, extraordinarily neat, everything in place, sheds and corrals whitewashed, efficient enough, but a bleak, cheerless place. The bunkhouse was a square box painted gray. Beyond a few straggling cottonwoods there were no trees or shrubs.

The place seemed deserted except for a Mexican at the corrals, with whom Malcolm had to talk Spanish. Too old

to have been in the fight at the Bear-paws, the Mexican studied the visitor with stupid eyes when asked where Whitman was.

Then he said, "He is in Thatcher," and went on with his work.

Malcolm headed away, on the Thatcher trail. As he rode, his anger, instead of cooling, set the harder. Settlement had only been postponed; it would be wherever and whenever the two men came face to face.

When his mount splashed across the ford into the little town, a dead silence held Thatcher; there was even no movement of the leaves of the tall Lombardy poplars that lined the streets. There were only half a dozen cow horses tied at the hitchracks. The men Whitman had hired, Malcolm guessed, had left the country, scattering to escape the law. Maybe Trine and Clennan, who had gathered and led the guerrilla force, had gone with them. That did not matter; they were but instruments of Cass Whitman.

The Howe buckboard was standing in front of the hotel and the spring wagon which had brought Brass to town was in front of the office-residence of Dr. Jan Ruysdal. Probably the Colonel and Lissie were in the Doctor's office, and by now the operation was over and Tom Brass's fate decided.

Crippled Sooey Maxon, who had driven Brass to town in the spring wagon, crossed limpingly.

"How's it with Tom?" asked Malcolm.

"Doc said he's goin' to make it."

Malcolm nodded. "Whitman in town?"

Sooey's eyes were curiously on Malcolm's face. "Yes. The buzzard had the nerve to be here in Thatcher when we come. He was talkin' to the sheriff. Saw him go into the Buckhorn Saloon a few minutes ago. But not a man out o' that gang is here. Reckon they were paid off and left the country."

The Buckhorn Saloon Malcolm had visited briefly once or twice for a beer. It was as good a place as any for his showdown with Whitman.

He dismounted to tie his horse by the side of the big supply store, and as he did so, Lissie appeared in the doorway of the establishment. Seeing him, she ran over.

"The doctor got the bullets out of Tom," she said. "He'll pull through. Did you see Dad? He's disappeared! And they say Whitman is in town."

Then a woman called out shrilly. "The Colonel's goin' into the Buckhorn." It was Mrs. Perkins, standing at the door of the little post-office on the corner.

The back door of the Buckhorn was nearer to Malcolm than the front one. Malcolm started his long legs to scissoring toward it, dropping into a little arroyo that angled straight toward the rear of the building. He could hear Lissie running behind him.

"You stay out of this!" he called sharply, and the footsteps died away but, glancing back, he saw the girl was still following, running lighty on her toes so as to make no noise.

He didn't stop to argue with her. With the Colonel already in the saloon, there was no time. It would be over before she could get in there anyway.

His hand was on the gun in his holster as he burst in through the back door and into the darkened interior of the Buckhorn. Out of the bright sunlight into the semi-darkness of the place, his eyes were handicapped, but he could see well enough to identify Whitman. Not only the rancher, but also Trine and Clennan were there, the three in a line fanned out from the long bar to the side wall, their backs to him.

The Colonel stood a little inside the doorway, the fancy pistols with the gold inlaid handles still in his holsters. With his head thrown back, he was talking to the three, his eyes fixed on them so intently that he did not see Malcolm enter.

"You miscreants!" the Colonel's voice rang out. "You damned killin' whelps, I'm calling you to account."

The three, with their backs to Malcolm, had not seen him enter. He shot the bolt of the door, barring it against

Lissie, and stepped softly toward the three.

Cass Whitman laughed jeeringly. "You better get out of here, while you can stagger out on your old legs," he told Howe. "I don't want to hurt a old pelican like you—the father of the girl I'm going to marry. You show more nerve than sense in comin' in here and threatenin' us. Your shaky old paws couldn't hit the side of a barn if you was standin' inside it."

"Forget my age!" the Colonel stormed in return. "I'll take on the three of you one by one, if you're men enough to meet me that way. If not, I'll take on the three of you at once."

"Big odds agin you, Colonel," boomed Zeb Trine's deep bass.

"Not so big as you think," remarked Malcolm calmly.

They swung their heads to glance over their shoulders and, seeing him, Whitman immediately shifted his feet to sidle close to the side wall, keeping his face toward both the Colonel and Malcolm. Likewise Clennan who was near the bar shifted to place his back to it. Trine, in the middle of the room, hesitated. All three were plainly made uneasy at having been caught between the Colonel and Malcolm, not liking the situation at all.

The Buckhorn was a fancy place with its polished redwood bar and back bar, its long mirror, red-tiled floor, expensive poker tables. It gave to the meeting of the five men a kind of dignity.

Lissie Howe pounded on the back door and rattled the knob. "Let me in!" she called desperately.

The Colonel and Malcolm traded glances. Malcolm hoped that the Colonel would leave Whitman to him. Trine and Clennan were dangerous, but not as dangerous as Whitman.

As for Malcolm, he had no illusions. He was no gunman; had never had occasion to train himself to become one. His father who had been an old-time Colorado sheriff and rancher had been a lightning gunman, but he had never passed on his skill to his son. The gun days were gone, Malcolm's father had maintained, and a man was better off not to depend on a weapon. His father had been wrong: in this country it had gone back to the old times when sheriffs had been few and men had not had the time nor the desire to call on them.

Malcolm was sure of just one thing, he could get out his six-shooter and kill Whitman before he himself was killed. He was so sure of it that as he faced Whitman his determination and confidence showed in his eyes. Whitman did not like the situation into which he had been forced; he was the sort that preferred to take no unnecessary chances.

"You talk pretty brash for a plow hand, Malcolm," he sneered. "Better remember your paw has been made a little stiff by holding plow handles."

"Maybe it's not quite as limber as your tongue, Whitman," retorted Malcolm. "But it's not too stiff to kill you, Whitman, before you kill me."

Lissie rattled on the door knob again and called out. The Colonel stood, hands above his guns, facing Trine and Clennan, leaving Whitman to the younger man. What Malcolm hoped was that Clennan and Trine would decide to stay out of this, leaving it between him and Whitman.

But it was not to be. Without warning Clennan, the tricky ex-cattle inspector, began the fight, flattening himself close to the bar, while he drew his gun. Ignoring the Colonel, he turned his gun toward Malcolm, and Whitman against the wall opposite, followed suit. Trine, slow to think and to move, was caught flat-footed and had no part in the first few split seconds of the battle.

Clennan's first shot sailed a little wide of Malcolm who, paying no attention to Clennan, had turned to fire at Whitman. Malcolm had drawn with amazing swiftness for one who was not a gunman, the weapon bucking in his hand at the instant that a pale jet of flame leaped from Whitman's gun.

The Colonel, also, had lost no time in getting into action; nerved to a supreme

effort, his hands whipped down and up, to fire two simultaneous shots at Clennan, one striking Clennan in the leg, enough to make the inspector's second shot at Malcolm also sail wide.

Whitman's bullet had slapped into Malcolm's left arm, but Malcolm's shot had damaged Whitman far more, hitting somewhere near the middle of his body. The horse-faced rancher slumped back against the wall, bending at the waist, the muzzle of his forty-five dropping toward the floor.

Turning from him, Malcolm swept his weapon around on Trine and Clennan, firing first at the hulk of the ex-range foreman who was finally getting into action by snapping a shot at the Colonel.

Howe was hit by Trine's shot, but his old muscles refused to give up. The paired guns in his hands deliberately blazed away at Clennan who, plastered against the bar, was slipping down it now, still trying to trigger his gun. One of the Colonel's bullets hit Clennan hard, and the man pitched forward, to sprawl on the floor, face down.

Zeb Trine gave a bellow of pain as Malcolm's gun sent a tunneling slug into him. He tried to turn his gun from the Colonel to Malcolm, frowning intently with the effort of thumbing back the hammer. Suddenly he jack-knifed at the knees and went to the floor an awkward, paralyzed heap.

Meanwhile Cass Whitman, lying prone on the floor, had managed to raise on an elbow, and staring fixedly at Malcolm as if trying to see him through a fog, slowly leveled his six-shooter again. The gun roared dully in the room, to spin Malcolm around to face Whitman once more.

A hoarse, croaking voice came from Whitman's throat. "Got you, you damn plow hand!"

The hammer of his gun went back again, but before he could fire, Jim Malcolm, his eyes straining like Whitman's to pierce a haze, had shot a final bullet to make sure for Tom Brass's sake. At the impact of the slug, Whitman dropped his gun to the floor with a clatter and slowly began drawing his legs up toward his stomach. Midway his limbs stiffened, and suddenly the man lay rigid, still.

His legs were turning weak under Jim Malcolm, and then he found himself sitting on the floor, with Lissie's arm about him, supporting him, her face close to his. Lissie had climbed in through a window.

"Oh, Jim darling," she cried.

"I'm all right. Go to your father," he said. It was as if his voice came from a long distance. But she kissed him before she left. He was not all right, he realized. A great weariness was overcoming him, as if a giant hand pressed him to the floor.

But he could still see the sheen on Lissie's blond hair as she unlocked the door and then knelt by the Colonel, while beyond the two he saw that men were rushing into the saloon, to stand staring at the five men on the floor. The insurance man, Somerset, was among them, a bandage about his head, giving the Easterner an odd piratical appearance.

The Buckhorn slowly faded after that for Malcolm. If everything was to fade for him forever, it was not too great a price to have paid, he thought, although he loved life as well as any man and wished he could live to see the gleam of the sun on Lissie Howe's hair again.

WHEN he came to, it was in a bare hospital-like room containing two beds, a room in the big private house where Doctor Jim Ruysdal, the rolly-polly little Dutch doctor, maintained a practice that contained treatment of far too many gunshot wounds. It was afternoon, Malcolm realized by the sun; the fight had happened hours ago.

Lissie was there, standing by the bed, and seeing her, he knew immediately that he wasn't going to die, for the plain reason that there was too much to live for. He saw the Colonel on the next bed, asleep, breathing heavily as if under the influence of an opiate. Then the doc-

tor was bending over him, smiling.

"Well, well," said the doctor with a slight accent. "So you decided to wake up, eh? That iss goot. You and the Colonel iss too tough to die, eh? I think I pull Clennan and Trine t'rough too, although they are pretty sick men. But Cass Whitman—the undertaker has to be his doctor."

That was maybe as it should be—justice! But five men firing at one another at close range and only one man killed was different from the fights the Colonel engaged in in former days. The Colonel would have a lot of slurs to cast at the marksmanship exhibited in the Buckhorn.

The doctor bustled away and left him. Malcolm was weak; too weak to raise a hand, but not to smile. Nor to talk.

"Here's something that will help you get well," said Lissie. "You're not going to have to go away and leave your old Kaffir corn and your oat haystacks. Guess what! That Somerset man is president of that big insurance company, not just an appraiser. He says that the company couldn't afford to make an investment on a ranch in this country, but he's got a private fortune, and he wants to buy in on a good cattle ranch. He'll put up the money to clear off the mortgage, taking stock in a company that we'll organize. On condition that you keep your job of general manager, with an interest in the company to be paid for out of the profits he seems to think you can make."

"I bet," he said, "you talked him into that."

"No. I didn't have to. He proposed it of his own accord. It tickled him to be in that fight last night. Said it kept all the illusions he's been nursing about the West." She chuckled. "When I saw him a little while ago he had just thrown a Western book he was reading out of the window. Wasn't enough action in it for him. Said the author ought to come West and see what really goes on out here."

She moved her hand over the rough bristles of his face and knelt to put her cheek against his.

"In one way that's all too bad, Lissie," he said. "I was just going to offer you a ride in a wagon, a covered one, headed for some place where we could get ourselves a little pocket of Frontier—on which to make our home."

"You could still get that wagon," she murmured, "and we could pretend that we were taking a trip to look for that place. And then at the last we'd pull up on the mountain above the Bear-paws and we could decide that it would be our home. You said there was enough work on it to keep you busy—and your sons."

"A lot of work to do," he agreed. "Enough for my—our grandsons. I've got a lot of plans. I didn't tell it before, but part of that Bear-paws range, if it were managed as scientifically as it should be, ought to be grazed by sheep."

"Sheep!" she exclaimed and looked apprehensively over her shoulder to make sure that the Colonel was still asleep. "You go back to sleep, young man," she ordered sternly. "You're out of your head. There's a place on the Bear-paws where even efficiency and scientific management stops, and that place is sheep." She put her cheek against his again. "Don't you ever think of anything except that ranch?"

"Part of me I suppose always will—my head," he said. "But my heart, it can only think of one thing, too. You, Lissie. You'd better send out word to have that covered wagon greased. It's not going to be long until you and me are going to be takin' that trip—to a new Frontier!"

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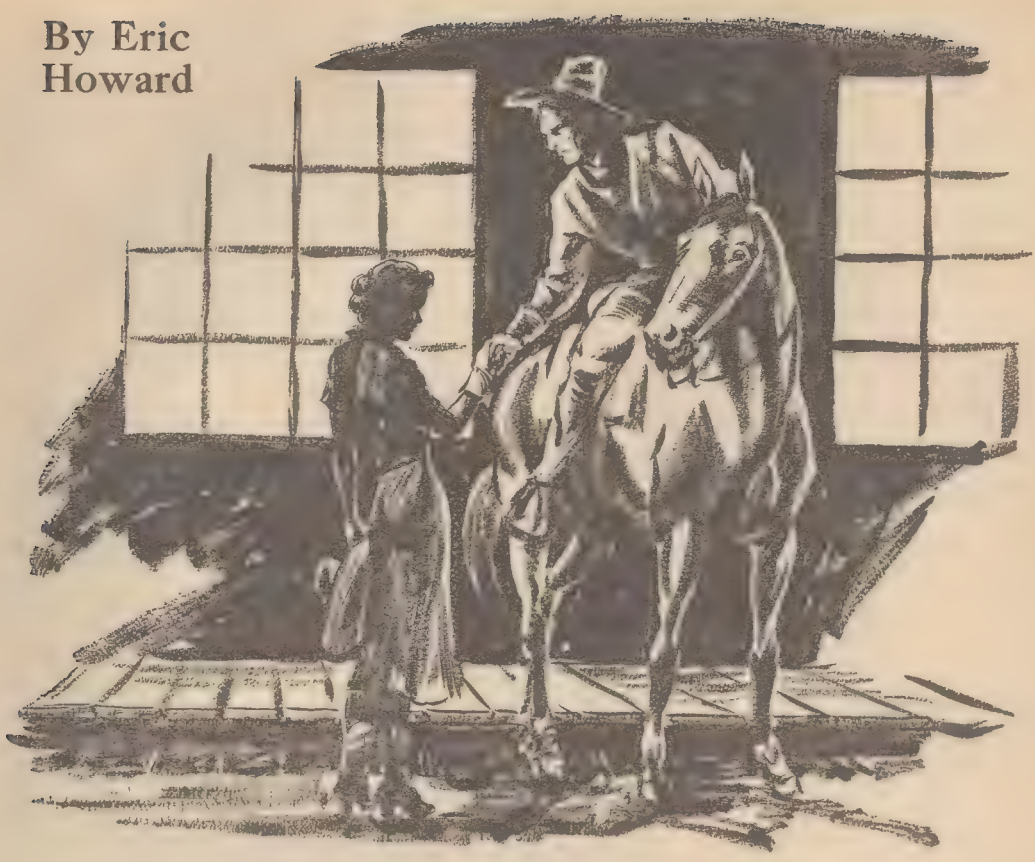


The Unafraid

"There's nothin' a man has got to do except die," an old-timer said. But Lon found that a real man has got to do a lot of things—sometimes with a gun, and sometimes for a girl who's too good for him.

TWO men sat at a table, in a dingy upstairs office in the town of Pineville, their shoulders hunched as they peered at a crudely drawn map.

The larger and older of the two men, with a thick cigar at the corner of his mouth, pointed at the map with a stubby finger.

"There she lays," he said. "It's a desert grazin' claim, a full section of land, and the only piece I ain't got sewed up. The railroad engineers want to cut through there, on account if they don't, they'll have to build around this here hogback, which would cost money, real money."

The younger man leaned back in his chair and rolled a cigarette.

"So you want me to try to get old Silas Gregg to sign over a right of way? All right, Bill. I'll take a whirl at it. How much is it worth to you?"

"I'll pay you a hundred dollars, Lon," Bill Dyke said earnestly.

Lon McBride laughed, reached for a bottle on the table and poured himself a drink.

"Gettin' generous, ain't you, boy?" he drawled. "One of these days you'll get

so big-hearted you'll have a pain in your chest."

"Be reasonable, Lon," Bill pleaded. "Name a fair price."

Lon McBride, chuckling, puffed at his cigarette, blew the smoke toward the ceiling and said calmly, "Two thousand, Bill, if I land it; nothin' if I don't."

"Two thousand!" shouted Dyke. "Man, you're crazy! I can't—"

Lon stood up. "All right," he agreed easily. "I'm crazy. You don't want to carry on negotiations with a crazy man, so I'll trail along. So long. See you in jail."

He started for the door, a lanky, lithe man, with slow, graceful movements—movements that somehow suggested a lot of reserve power. In his carriage, as well as in his face, there was that which suggested recklessness and indifference to what might happen. But that air might come from the whiskey he had consumed this morning—a good many stiff drinks and it was not yet noon.

"Wait!" Bill Dyke shouted.

"No use talkin', Bill," Lon said with his hand on the door knob. "Your hundred dollars—why, shucks, with any of my usual luck, I can get that out of a game of stud. No use me workin' for such wages. Besides, I hear this old feller, Si Gregg, is a tough hombre. If you don't like my terms, why don't you tackle him yourself?"

Bill Dyke swallowed. "Well," he said, "I had a run-in with him once, and with that blasted granddaughter of his. I wouldn't have a chance to get 'em to sign up. It's got to be somebody they don't know. You've got to get on the good side of 'em and talk 'em into it. I'm willin' to go as high as a thousand dollars to them—that's liberal, a lot more'n their whole outfit is worth. Just a section of raw land, a shack and a few starvin' cows. I need you to handle this for me, Lon."

Lon turned and faced the other man. Bill Dyke's round, heavy-featured face, with small blue eyes that darted from side to side, suggested the greed that was his dominant trait.

"Five hundred!" Bill proposed.

"Two thousand," Lon said. "No use beatin' the price down. I didn't ask for it. I don't like the idea anyhow. That old jasper has had a hard time up in the hills. I don't see why I should do him out of what the railroad might pay him."

"Gettin' noble or somethin'?" Bill asked.

"Unless I get my price for the dirty work," Lon laughed. "I don't mind skinnin' a man, but I do aim to get paid for it."

Bill Dyke looked down at the map on the table. When he spoke again, it was in a low, menacing tone.

"There's things I know, Lon, that you wouldn't want spread around."

Lon did not react to the veiled threat as Bill had expected. He laughed.

"That's right," he agreed. "And you won't spread 'em around. It wouldn't be healthy. You see, Bill, you can't hold anything over me. Because the difference between us is you're afraid to die and I ain't. You give me cause and I'll shoot it out with you. I don't much care who wins, but Ill do my best to drop you. I ain't exactly slow. So you want to get out of your head any idea you got in there that you can hold anything over me. *Sabe?*"

This speech Lon uttered in an even, emotionless tone, except for the last word. That word he snapped like a whip. Bill started. Lon laughed lazily.

"I didn't mean—" Bill began.

"Let it drop," Lon shrugged. "Reckon you'll have to get somebody else to handle this or do it yourself. My terms are final. I never cut rates on robbery or killin'."

He swung the door open. Bill glanced at the map, did some hasty calculating.

"All right, Lon," he said quickly. "You're holdin' me up, but it's a deal."

Lon lounged back into Bill's little office, a frown on his face. He didn't like the job, and he was just as well satisfied to stay right here in Pineville. He had purposely put his price up. But he

shrugged and sat down, reaching for the bottle.

"It's a deal," he agreed. "Two thousand when I turn over the signed right of way. One thousand to Gregg. How much you goin' to get out of the company? Never mind. Tell me all you know about Gregg. Did you say he had a granddaughter?"

"Yeah. A spitfire. A hellcat. It's like this, Lon. . . ."

Bill Dyke proceeded to give him all the information he had. Later, they left the office and walked down the street to a little restaurant. When they had eaten, they parted.

"I'll be back," Lon said, "when I get through robbin' the poor old coot. Have my money ready for me."

"Speed it up," Bill urged. "Do it as fast as you can."

Lon waved his hand, walked down to the stable where he kept his horse. Presently, he was riding out of town.

About half an hour later, another man, after a conference with Bill Dyke, rode out. Bill was not exactly a trusting soul. He wanted somebody to keep an eye on Lon, somebody to report to him from time to time what Lon was doing, what progress he was making. Because Lon might, conceivably, get the idea in his head that he could sell the right of way directly to the railroad or that he could hold Bill up. Bill wanted him watched.

He picked a little, dried-up man named Spike Darrow, who was fast with a gun and had recently lost a little pile to Lon. Bill didn't intend to pay Lon two thousand dollars—if he could help it. Perhaps, with Spike's help, he could help it.

NOW the more he thought about it, as he rode along at an easy pace, straight in his saddle, the less Lon liked the job. He wasn't one to go in for scruples, any more. There were few things he wouldn't do, for a price. His objection, in this case, was that there was no fun in helping to rob an old man and a girl. Silas Gregg had been a tough hombre, once, it was said, but he was too old now to put up much of a fight.

But two thousand dollars was still a lot of money. He rode on, planning his method of approach.

Suddenly he halted. He had heard a sound from the mesquite beside the road. It sounded like a moan, but it was followed by a faint, though sincere, "Damn!"

Then he saw a figure moving, painfully, slowly, on hands and knees. A girl, wearing levis, a tan shirt, boots, dragging herself toward the road.

Lon swung down and ran toward her.

She propped herself on her hands and looked up at him. She was in pain, and there was a frown between her eyes; her lips were tight. But, in spite of that, she was pretty, more than pretty. Her face was a pure oval, her skin warmly tinted by the sun, her hair a neat, soft frame for her face, her eyes very deep blue.

Lon dropped down beside her. "Take it easy," he said. "What happened?"

The girl spoke crisply through her tight lips. "Bobcat scared my horse just as I was getting on," she said. "Caught my foot in the stirrup as he bolted. Dragged a piece, twisted my ankle."

He saw that her boot was tight from the swelling. He jerked out his pocket knife and reached down and cut the boot away.

"Hey!" she protested. "Those boots cost money."

"Ankles come high, too," he said, and cut the leather.

Her foot was quite small. She was wearing a gray woollen sock, which he took off. He put his hand on the swollen ankle, pressed gently, then harder.

"Ouch!" the girl said.

"It's a bad one. You'll be on a crutch for a while. Where do you live?"

"About five miles back in the hills," she told him. "I'm Betty Gregg. I live with my grandfather, Silas Gregg. I haven't seen you around before, have I?"

"Maybe not," Lon admitted. "I'm Lon

McBride. I was ridin' out to see your grandfather on a little matter of business. I'll take you home."

"That danged pony of mine!" the girl said.

Lon got a canteen from his saddle, poured water over the ankle, massaged it gently.

"I'll tape it up to give it some support," he said. "Do better when we get you home. A drink of good licker might make it easier to stand."

"I'll get along without firewater," she said.

"Suit yourself," Lon nodded, and lifted her from the ground.

He carried her to his horse, surprised at how little she weighed, and lifted her to the saddle. He swung up back of her.

"Thanks," she said. "Glad you came along. The heck of it is, Gramp is kind of sick. I want to get back to him. I was afraid he'd be alone all night, if nobody came along."

"You'd have been alone, too," Lon pointed out.

"I could stand it," she said. "Gramp is feeble."

Lon smiled slightly, then frowned. He had had a hunch, all along, that this was no job for him. Now it looked even worse. A feeble old man and a girl—not the people he'd pick on to defraud.

They jogged along in silence. Lon noted the softness of her wavy hair, the smooth line of her neck below it. He steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. After a time she glanced back at him.

"Lon McBride, you said?" she asked. "What was the business you had with Gramp?"

"Figured on buying a little place," Lon said. "Heard about yours and thought it might do."

The girl laughed.

"What's funny?" Lon asked.

"When you see it, you won't want to buy," she assured him. "Our springs have dried up, our little range is burned. A goat couldn't live on it, let alone a cow. Nobody'd buy it. On top of that, Gramp won't sell. Bad as it is, he's going to stay there. He hates towns, and if he sold he'd have to go to some town. He's afraid they'd put him in a poor house, I guess. I keep telling him I'd get work and take care of him, but he's plenty stubborn. I guess you get that way when you get old."

"I've known some pretty stubborn young ones," Lon said. "Maybe—"

"There's my spooky pony!"

The girl pointed to a buckskin, grazing in a flat. Lon reached for his rope.

"I'll get him," he said.

"Wait! He'll come over if we just stand here."

The pony looked up, nickered. Lon's horse answered. After a time, curiosity brought the pony close; but he halted some feet away, wary and alert. Lon roped him.

They rode side by side, then, Lon on Betty's wiry buckskin.

"You're just wasting your time," she said. "Gramp won't sell. Might as well go back to town and let me go on home alone."

"I've got a lot of time to waste," Lon said.

They found her grandfather asleep in a chair on the porch of the weather-beaten little ranch house. He was a frail man, nearly eighty, with a large mustache spread across a thin face. Lon carried Betty into the house.

"Let him sleep," he said, "while I see what kind of a doc I'd make."

He treated her ankle, using alternately hot and cold water. Then he bound it up again.

"Stay off it," he said. "Is there a crutch around? No? Then I'll make one."

"Stay off it? How can I? I've got work to do."

"Stay off it if you want it to mend. I'll do what has to be done."

Betty looked at him with a skeptical smile. "Why so kind and friendly, stranger? You don't owe us anything."

He laughed frankly. "I want something from you."

"You still thinking of buying this place—after seeing it?"

"Looks all right to me," Lon said. "Dry, yes. But I like it dry. Now stay there till I make you a crutch."

By the time old Si Gregg awakened from his childlike sleep, Lon had done many things—fed and watered the few head of cattle, fed the chickens, lugged in wood and water from the well, and started supper. Betty hobbled around after him.

"You work like you knew how," she said. "It's a pleasure to see a man that does."

He laughed. He had done plenty of hard work, true, but not lately. He found Betty an easy person to be with, but he avoided looking into her eyes. Because, in spite of how different they were, they reminded him of someone he wanted to forget—of a girl who had allowed the law to take him when a word from her would have saved him, and who had gone away with the man the law really wanted.

The old man woke up and walked into the house, yawning and stretching.

"What in time?" he began, seeing Lon at the stove. "Where'd you rope the cook, honey? What's wrong? Why you usin' that?" He pointed to the crutch Lon had made.

Betty introduced Lon, reported what had happened, then announced that Lon had come to see him about buying the place.

"Not for sale!" shouted Gregg. "No, by gravy! This here's Freedom Hill, and here I stay! You don't get me in ary a town. Pineville!" He wrinkled his nose. "Pineville is just a bad smell at a crossroads. You don't get me there. Pineville! Where two-legged wolves—like that dad-blasted Bill Dyke—are let run wild. No, sir! She's not for sale."

"*'Sta bien!*" Lon shrugged. "Let's drop it, then."

Old Si peered at him, puzzled. "What you want it for, anyway?" he asked. "It ain't ary good."

Lon laughed. "That's no way for a seller to talk, runnin' down his own stuff. Say I just like the scenery around here."

"I ain't a seller," Si protested. "I'm keepin' this mis'able section of desert waste. Betty can sell, if she's a mind to, after I'm gone."

Lon put food on the table. Si pulled up his chair. Betty hobbled across and sat down.

"You must've done some cookin' in your time, boy," Si remarked. "Couldn't make better biscuits myself. You still didn't answer my question, what's a young feller like you want with such a place?"

"He said he just liked the scenery, Gramp," Betty interposed. "Don't go asking a lot of questions."

"Oh, that's all right," Lon said. He had decided on a quixotic course of action. "I'll tell you just how it is. I don't want the place, I just want a right of way through it. The railroad—"

"Damn the railroad!" Si said. "I hate 'em. Too bad they ever invented 'em." He peered at Lon intently. "So that's what you want, huh?"

Lon eyed him frankly. "Yeah. I was hired to come out here and swindle you out of a right of way," he said. "I was to go as high as a thousand dollars, which is what it's worth. Mebbe more'n it's worth."

"I don't want ary dad-blasted railroad goin' through here!"

"But I can go still higher," Lon continued. "I can go as high as three thousand."

"Three thousand dollars!" Betty exclaimed. "Gramp, think of that! With all that money—"

Si gestured to her. "You work for the railroad, son?"

"Not exactly," Lon admitted. "They delegated a man to sign up these rights of way through here and he's done so, pretty complete. He's right busy and he asked me to talk to you. I'll put my cards on the table. You might get as much, mebbe more, from the railroad; mebbe you'd get less. They got ways of causin' a man trouble. A way across your land is worth money 'cause it lays between two big spreads. I think three

thousand is top money and I'd advise you to take it."

Si drummed the table. "You said you was authorized to pay one thousand. How come you raise the ante? Who you workin' for?"

"Gramp! Please!"

But the old man was on his feet, shaking his fist. Blood rushed to his face.

"I know!" he said. "I know! For Bill Dyke! That's who. Why, that crook—"

He swayed. Lon caught him in his arms as he started to fall.

"I'm sure sorry he got so worked up," he said, and carried the old man to a cot.

"Is it true you're working for Dyke?" the girl asked. "Gramp hates him."

"Dyke is the man," Lon replied, opening Si's shirt. "He's the one that's buyin' rights of way for the railroad. He knowed your grandpa wouldn't do business with him, so he sent me to talk to him. He needs a way through here to complete the line." He looked up at her. "Needs it so bad he was willin' to pay you a thousand, me two thousand for gettin' it. That'd make three thousand."

The girl's eyes were quite cold. "No reason for you to give up your pay—for swindling us," she said.

"No reason," Lon admitted, "except that I know better ways of makin' two thousand dollars. Like stickin' up a bank or shootin' somebody. Believe that or not. I don't take money for stealin' a baby's candy."

Betty lifted her head, proudly. "We dont want charity from a gunman," she said. "I think you'd better go back to Pineville, Mr. McBride. If we deal at all, it will be direct with the railroad."

Lon flushed, looked away from her at the feeble old man.

"I still like the scenery," he drawled. "Looks to me like you need a hand around here. Let's just drop this right of way matter. It ain't important. I'll stay till he's better and you can do without a crutch."

"Thank you," the girl said with sarcastic emphasis, "but—"

"I'll stay," Lon said quietly, but decisively. "You don't know how bad your grandpa's heart is, I reckon. Would you be so good as to get me a basin of hot water, so's I can get his blood circulatin' good again?"

If she had been sarcastic, he was more so. She stared at him for a moment, as he massaged the old man's thin wrists, then turned to the stove.

Lon worked over Silas Gregg, restoring the flow of blood to his frail frame. He undressed him, wrapped him in blankets, poured whiskey diluted with water down his throat, and sat by him, feeling his faint pulse. He spoke little to the girl.

"Gettin' better," he remarked. "Hadn't ought to live here—too high. He'll be all right. Call me if there's any change. I'll be outside."

He went out and sat on the steps, building a cigarette. He had never seen so many stars, so bright a sky. He frowned. That had been a fool thing he had tried to do, and he had gone about it wrong. And all because Betty reminded him of Belle Nash, somehow—of Belle whom he had loved and who had betrayed him, changing his whole life, putting him on the wrong side of the law.

Yes, Betty reminded him of Belle; but she was very different. Clear-eyed, courageous, proud. Belle had been none of those things; he had only thought so then. And he had learned, he thought, not to trust a girl. Yet Betty was one to be trusted, he was sure. The way she had endured pain without a murmur. . . .

LON remained for four days. Silas Gregg did not recover as quickly as he had from other spells. Betty was frightened, worried. Lon did the work that had to be done, talked with Betty about everything but the right of way.

Old Si had lost some of his spirit, this time. Beckoning Lon to him, on the third afternoon, he said, in a resigned tone, "Reckon I'll have to pull up stakes. Like you say, it's too blamed high here.

Better go down to San Andreas. No use hangin' on like an old mule. Better for Betty, too. I been wrong, making her live up here all alone with an onery old jasper like me. I'll take you up, boy. Dyke and the railroad would make trouble anyhow. Too old to fight 'em. I'll sell you a right of way. We'll sell off what stock we have and head for San Andreas."

Lon called Betty in.

"It's up to you two," he said. "I don't care one way or the other. If you want to deal with the railroad, you might get more. Or less. You say so and I'll go tell Dyke it's no go. He'll let you alone on my say-so. I can't handle the railroad, though. Might be a long delay there and some trouble. I think you ought to get to San Andreas as quick as you can. So if you will sell for three thousand—"

"One thousand," said Betty. "We don't want your money, Mr. McBride."

Lon shrugged. "It's Bill Dyke's," he said. "I was engaged to get this right of way by hook or crook, do you out of it any way I could. I purposely put my price high, 'cause it ain't my regular kind of work. The way it stands, I don't want pay for it. The money ought to go to you."

"His regular work," Betty said to her grandfather, "is holding up banks and hiring out as a gunman—to men like Dyke. But he's got a soft streak in him. Just because you're old, Gramp, and I'm a girl."

"You got no right to talk to Lon that-a-way, honey," Si protested. "He's been a mighty good friend to us. What you got against him?"

Lon smiled. "She don't like hombres who hire out to do the dirty work for crooks like Dyke," he said. "She's right. But there's got to be some bad hombres around, just to show how good the others are in contrast. No use arguin', old-timer. Do as you please."

Si looked at him. There was a gentle smile on his lips. Betty walked outside, her hand to her lips.

"The price is one thousand," Si said. "I'll sign your paper. What you collect from Dyke and what you do with it is your business."

"That's final?"

"Final! And more'n the place is worth."

He scrawled his signature on the paper Lon handed him.

"I'll stay tonight," Lon said. "Help you pack up, load your wagon, round up your stock and see you down to Pineville."

"Thanks, Lon. And don't take to heart what Betty said."

"She's right," Lon nodded. "I'm bound to agree with her. I been doin' dirty work for pay—and I ain't boastin' about it."

He went outdoors and into the wagon shed. He took off the wagon wheels and greased them. He was at work when Betty approached him.

"Lon," she said directly, "I'm sorry. I had no right to say those things. If I had been a man, you would have hit me or shot me. I'm ashamed of myself. I appreciate what you've done for us, all of it, and—well, I'm sorry."

Lon glanced at her. He saw that her eyes were shiny, as though there was moisture in them.

"Nothin' to be sorry for," he shrugged. "You're dead right. I've got a gun for hire. You've got a right to your opinion of such a hombre."

"Why?" she asked. "Why, Lon McBride?"

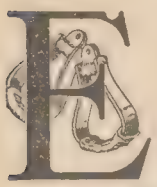
He looked at her, poker-faced, silent.

"You could be anything, do anything," she said softly. "There's no need for you. . . . It isn't my business, I know; I have no right to ask you. But you're so—so good, I can't understand it."

"Give a dog a bad name," he said stiffly, "and chain him up, he likely turns bad. Throw a man in jail, let all his friends turn on him, he comes out ready to kill before he gets killed. That's the way things work out. Now you better line up what you aim to take with you. I'll load the wagon and we'll start in the mornin'."

His tone was so cool and impersonal

that Betty turned and went up to the house.



EARLY the next morning, they got started, Lon riding ahead, driving ten head of cattle, Betty driving the heavily loaded wagon. Si planned to sell the cattle in Pineville; the crate of chickens, too; then go on to San Andreas, down in the valley.

About half-way to Pineville, Lon heard a cry behind him. He whirled. It was Si calling. Beside the wagon was a man on horseback, a slight man wearing a handkerchief mask. Lon rode back.

"Stay where you are, feller!" the masked man called, when he was fifty yards from the wagon. "Just one thing I want out of you. Better give or it'll be too bad for this old man and the gal."

He had a gun pointed at Si Gregg, covering Betty as well.

"What do you want?" Lon asked.

"The right of way you got from him. Drop it and ride on, cowboy. Then I will also take the money you paid him, and call it a day."

Lon gritted his teeth. While the slight gunman covered the Greggs, there was nothing he dared attempt.

"You tell Bill Dyke I'll get him for this!" he announced. "I'll drop him sure as you're born!"

"If you can get to him, mebbe! Dish out that paper, and you, grandpop, shell out the dinero."

Lon pulled out the paper, tossed it down beside the road.

"Ride back and take care of your skinny old cows," the gunman said. "Stay up there, too. I'll ride alongside the wagon till we get to town, so's you won't pull any funny business."

Over his shoulder, Lon saw Si Gregg hand over the money he had received, saw Betty drive ahead and the gunman pick up the right of way with a quick swoop. So long as the gunman remained close to the Greggs, gun ready, there was nothing Lon could do.

His lips moved in silent cursing as he thought of Bill Dyke, of this planned double-cross. He was a little surprised that Bill would show so much nerve, but of course, he planned to have a body-guard with him when Lon returned—a body-guard that would cut Lon down before he could kill Dyke.

Lon remembered something he had heard an old-timer say.

"There ain't no *got to*," it went. "There's nothin' a man has *got to* do except die. No, sir, not even pay taxes!"

Dyke thought he had Lon where he had to submit. But he didn't. Lon didn't have to submit to anything.

They reached the outskirts of Pineville. Lon drove the cattle into a cattle-buyer's corral. He swung back and halted at a gesture from the gunman.

"Take your mask off, Spike," he said. "I know you."

"A lot of good that does," Spike said. "We'll give you just a few hours to leave town, the three of you. The sheriff has got a warrant for your arrest, McBride—and you two want to drift on. Start any trouble here and you'll get plenty. *Adios.*"

He spurred his horse, dashed back of an adobe wall, turned into an alley. Lon made no attempt to draw or fire. That would come later.

He rode back to the wagon. He saw that Si Gregg was shaking in impotent rage. Betty was staring straight ahead.

"I didn't expect that," Lon said. "Didn't think Dyke had the nerve. My fault. Should've been on guard. But I'll get your money for you. Go see the cattle buyer, sell your beef. Then keep on goin' toward San Andreas. I'll catch up with you."

"We'll tell the sheriff—" Betty began.

"No use," said her grandfather. "He's hand in glove with Dyke. I learned that before. What you aim to do, Lon?"

"Collect," Lon said. "Will you do like I say?"

Gregg glanced at Betty. Lon knew what he was thinking, what Betty was thinking. Each wanted the other safe, above all else. But Betty protested.

"You haven't a chance against Dyke

and all the others," she said to Lon. "You can't—"

"That's my regular work, Miss Betty," he said bleakly, "the kind I'm trained for. There's the cattle buyer, in front of his office. Sell—and get goin'. I'll bring your money to San Andreas, if not before."

"You mean if you don't get killed," Si said.

"That's possible," Lon agreed, "but hardly likely. It ain't happened yet. You'll do it?"

"Nothin' else for us. Luck, son."

Betty half-rose, tried to speak. Her grandfather put his hand on her wrist, pulled her down.

"Don't, honey. There's things a *man* has got to do."

Lon rode on into the town. Betty stared after him.

Within an hour, the beef had been sold. Betty drove through the town, went on. Lon was standing in front of the stable. He touched his hat.

The sheriff, remaining in his office, across the street, sent a boy to Lon, to tell him that if he was in town an hour later he would be jailed.

"Thank you, sonny," Lon said gravely. "You tell the sheriff I'm leavin' right now. Tell him I know when I'm licked, when the odds are too big."

"Yes, sir," the boy said.

The stable-owner looked at Lon as he led his horse out. "You ridin'?" he asked. "You givin' up?"

"Sure," Lon said. "I'd be a fool to fight."

"Well, I'm damned! You sure had me thinkin' otherwise. I had a better opinion of you."

"You mean you thought I was a fool," Lon laughed.

He mounted and rode out of town, the way the Greggs had gone.

Men in Pineville heaved a sigh of relief. But some shook their heads in disappointment, too. They had expected more of Lon McBride. Still, he was right; he was up against too much power, too many men. Dyke was too big for him.

AT MIDNIGHT Bill Dyke, sitting in the kitchen of his house, with three other men, poured a final drink and tossed it off. He was swaggering a little, boasting. He was laughing at Lon McBride.

"I sure called that tin-horn!" he said. "Run him out like a yaller dawg with his tail between his legs. All right, boys. I'm hittin' the hay. You do likewise."

"Want any of us to stand guard outside, boss?"

"Hell, no! You think I'm afraid of that feller? He's gone, gone for good. Get to bed."

The others, one of whom was Spike Darrow, drifted to their rooms. Bill Dyke went to his, sat down on the bed, began pulling off his clothes.

Suddenly someone outside called his name. He jumped as though a gun had roared and reached for his gun. He stood there, trembling; then got up nerve enough to raise the window.

"Bill!" the man called. "That blamed McBride! He come back! Snuck into your office, clubbed Joe over the head. He wrecked your desk, busted open the locked drawers, pried hell out of your strong-box—grabbed everything! I went for him when he was runnin' to his horse. There was another feller with him, wearin' a mask. Don't know who. He slugged me. It all happened quick. Time the sheriff got there, they was gone. Headin' for San Andreas."

Bill leaned out, trembling, raging. He swore.

"Man, everything I own was in there!" he shouted furiously. "Money, papers, everything. Men! Spike! All of you!"

He roused his men, told them what had happened, urged them to get going after Lon.

"Get him and bring him back!" he yelled. "This time— And send the sheriff up here. We've got to make some plans."

Shortly after the men ran out of the house, Bill returned to the kitchen, started pacing up and down, waiting for the sheriff.

A knock came at the door.

"You, sheriff?" Bill asked.

The door swung open. Lon stepped in. He laughed at the expression on Bill's broad face.

For a half-second, Bill hesitated. Then, plunging forward, he took a desperate chance. He got his gun free as he leaped, tried to shoot Lon from his stooped position. The bullet struck the door jamb beside Lon's head.

"You asked for it," Lon said, "like your friend, the sheriff."

A terrible, almost animal cry came from Bill Dyke's throat. He fired again, wildly. Lon shot him between his small eyes, holstered his smoking gun, slipped out into the darkness.

Lon made his way on foot, a swift shadow, to the rear of the stable. He knocked lightly, twice, on the door. The stable-owner opened it and Lon stepped inside.

"Thanks, John," he said. "What happened?"

"Chased me to the bridge over the arroyo, like we thought. But I was under the bridge. They thundered over, kept goin'. Chasin' their tails out there, lookin' for you. They'll quit at the county line and head back. The sheriff over there won't stand for Bill Dyke or our sheriff tryin' anything in his bailiwick. Who lays dead? You get hit at all?"

"No. The sheriff is stunned like. Had to gun club him when he aimed to stop me gettin' to Bill. They'll be buryin' Bill. Took two shots at me, then I dropped him. Scared so his hand shook. The rest of 'em will fight among themselves, bust up. You talk turkey to the sheriff, John. Amongst them papers is notes the sheriff gave Bill—for money advanced. Dirty money. I've kind of got the whip hand, what with all them rights of way and Dyke's money. Reckon I can make a deal with the law and the railroad?"

"Boy, with that stuff you taken off Dyke, you can make any deal you want! Your horse is in the shed out there. Everything's in the saddlebags. Get out there. When they ride back, I'll tell 'em I saw you comin' into town, headin' for Bill's. When I do a lot o' yellin', urgin' 'em to go up to Bill's house, you light out. And don't let anything stop you this side of Andreas!"

They clasped hands. Lon slipped out, crossed the stable yard to the shed, stood in the darkness beside his horse, his hand on the animal's nose. He waited quietly, calmly, until the pounding hoofbeats and the shouts of men told him Dyke's followers had returned.

Tense, hand on the butt of his gun, he still waited. If they guessed John had been his companion and assistant in the robbery, if they searched the place. . . .

Then he breathed evenly, relaxed, led his horse out. They were riding up to Dyke's house. He hit the saddle, rode at a walk for a mile; then galloped through the night to the county line—and beyond.

FOUR days later, Lon McBride, hat in hand, embarrassed, stood in the sheriff's office in San Andreas. The sheriff was there. So was a representative of the railroad and a man who came from the governor.

It was the last who spoke. "Lon McBride," he said, "for your service in breaking up a gang who terrorized ranchers and forced them to sell rights of way at the point of a gun, for evidence exposing many crimes, including the lawlessness of a lawman, for your refusal to accept any part of the money found, for your courage, the governor of the state expresses his thanks, presents you with a full pardon that wipes the slate clean and restores your citizenship. Moreover, he has urged me to get you to accept a position on his staff as investigator."

"Sorry," Lon said. "Sure do thank the governor. Can't take it. If you don't mind, I've got to be goin'. Aim to hit the trail, ridin' north."

There was general handshaking. Lon put on his hat, moved to the door. A

horse he had bought, a rangy roan, was across the street. He crossed over, swung into the saddle with easy grace.

He had said good-by to Silas Gregg last night. Not to Betty. He had courage, but not that much. He was afraid he might show what he felt.

"Lon!"

There was Betty beside him.

"You're going away, Lon? Forever? I—we won't see you again?"

"Reckon that's best," he said.

"All right, Lon," she said, looking up, her eyes moist. "Whatever you want, whatever you think is best. I won't criticize again. I didn't understand. But I'll be thinking of you always. When you're in danger, I'll know it, feel it. I'll be praying for you, Lon, and—"

Her voice fell, but her eyes were brave. "Because I love you, you see, Lon. I can't help it. Wherever you go, no matter if I never see you again, I'll always love you." She reached out, held his hand, sobbed once, then started away.

Lon swung down and caught her. "I love you, too," he said. "That's how I feel. But it ain't right—a clean, sweet girl like you, and me—soiled with jail and crime."

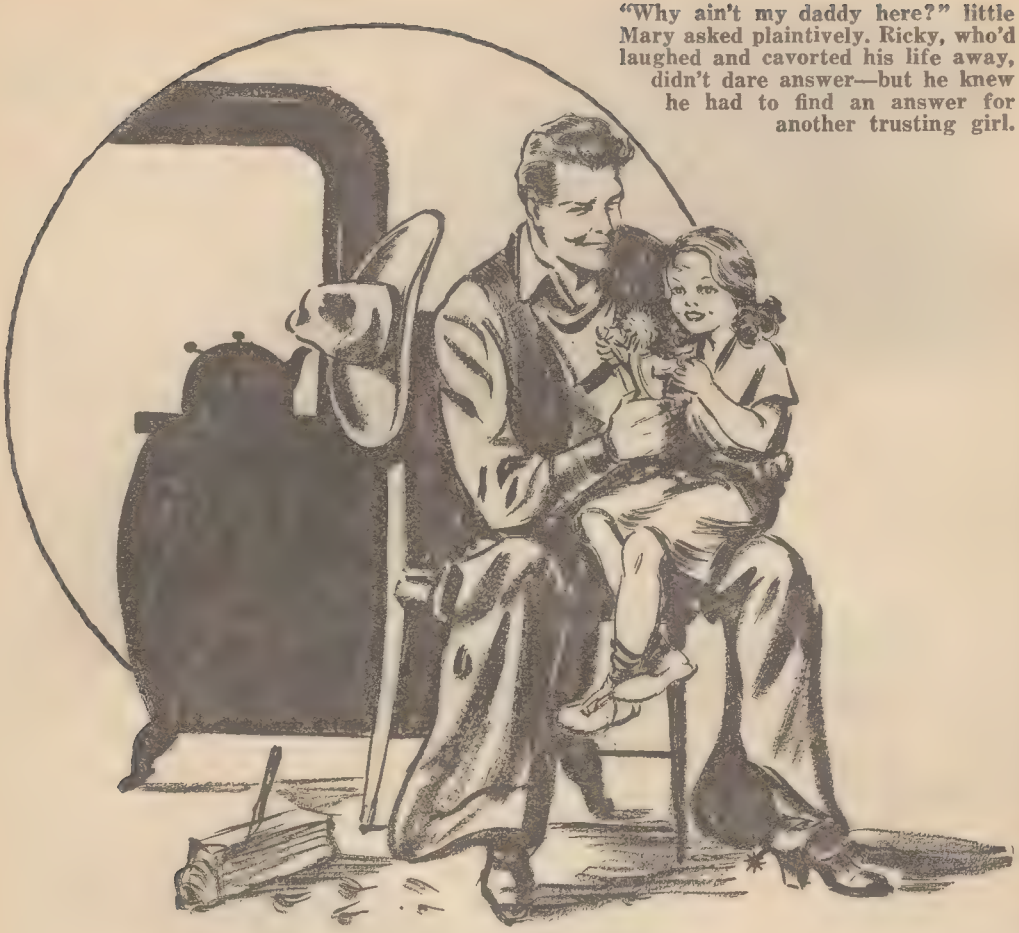
Betty's smile was radiant.

"Gramp says a girl should be proud to be Mrs. Lon McBride," she said. "Gramp is right. If you love me, won't you stay—or take me with you?"

"He'll stay," said Silas Gregg, behind them. "Or else you foller him, Betty girl, through hell and high water, if need be. He's a man to tie to, that one, and you tie to him."

"You willin' she should marry me, with my rep?" Lon asked.

"Shucks! Your rep! She's my grandchild, ain't she? And my rep, young feller, in my day, had yours beat ten ways to Sunday. I was a rootin', tootin' desperado. Blast me if that ain't why her grandma married me!" He chuckled, then added seriously, "You two'll get along. 'Cause you belong to the same clan—the Unafraid."



"Why ain't my daddy here?" little Mary asked plaintively. Ricky, who'd laughed and cavorted his life away, didn't dare answer—but he knew he had to find an answer for another trusting girl.

Grub Line Rider

By Stephen Payne

MORNING, stranger. So you're looking for Ricky Carleton? Well, along with the other R K cowhands, he'll be drifting into this here round-up camp toward noon. I'd be on circle with 'em myself only my horse hit a badger hole yesterday, and my ankle ain't felt right since.

You might as well light, set by the fire with me and watch the grub-spoiler work. Chilly here in the mountains these late fall days. But fresh snow back up on the peaks and slopes makes the old range look mighty pretty.

Hmn. This Ricky Carleton you're asking about is quite a character here in Osage Basin, and in Osage town. . . . How's that? A useless saddle tramp, no good to himself, nor nobody else, and managing to live only by riding the grub line? Reckon that mostly was plumb true, Mister. But why're you interested in him?

So-huh! You're his brother, and you ain't seen Ricky for sixteen years. But now you figure you might take him back

home and try to make him over? Well, this cattle country's in Ricky's blood. He's as much a part of it as yonder rocky butte sticking its head into the blue sky. I can tell you he won't never leave it, and I can tell you why.

Eh? How's a young buck like me able to say what Ricky will or won't do? And who am I anyway? S'posing we pass that up till after I set you straight 'bout this 'no account' brother of yours, Ricky Carleton.

THE PAST eight or ten years Ricky's regular summer job was punching cows for old Hugh Benwell, who owns this R K spread. Seems that Hugh Benwell tried to make a real hand out of Ricky. It wasn't no use. Ricky Carleton shed responsibility like a heavy tarp sheds a light rain. Send that rider on circle by his lonesome and he was sure to do one of two things. Find a shady aspen grove and bed down for the day, or else find a likely stream, take a swim, and then go fishing.

Next morning the round-up crew'd have all the fresh trout for breakfast they could gobble, and old Hugh'd bellow and snort and cuss and end up by firing Ricky. Then he'd hire the happy-go-lucky jasper all over again.

Hugh Benwell knew Ricky never earned his wages. But Hugh, from slouchy black hat to rattling spur rowels, a grizzled old cowman if ever you saw one, couldn't help liking the lazy buckaroo. So did the cowhands and the cook —and Hugh's son, Bob. Bob got liking him too darned well. I'll get to that in a minute.

Come late fall Ricky'd always draw his time, no matter how much Hugh tried to keep him working; or—more correct—on the payroll. Ricky'd mosey into Osage, get barbered and stock up with clothes. Had a sort of weakness for good clothes.

Finally, after he'd blown in what was left of his wages, he'd hit the grub line. By then the country'd be getting snowbound. Ranchers'd be feeding hay to their little bunches of cattle in the valleys, with the snow trails mostly following the creeks so a fella could get around from one place to another.

Quite a figure, Ricky made, on his tall black horse, with white Angora chaps, gay Mackinaw, big white hat. And believe me, most of the ranchers looked forward to his visits. The women and kids likewise, cooped in as they was all the long winter months. Ricky knowed how to make himself mighty agreeable. Good talker, smart, and better educated than the average rancher or cowhand in our country.

He brought these lonely folks all the latest news and the gossip. He told stories and sang songs. Bachelors sure welcomed his coming. Kids loved him, for Ricky knew a hundred games, and his clever hands could make anything from a rag doll to a hackamore. Funniest part was that Ricky'd do a heap more work while riding the grub line than he ever did while drawing wages.

Howsoever, some few folks hadn't no use for Ricky Carleton. Most of these was self-righteous, I'm-better'n-you geezers. They'd ridicule Ricky, and sneer, and feel mighty pleased with 'emselves for doing so.

But the man who scorned Ricky and hated him the most was old Ike Gilson. His feud with Ricky began when he swapped horses with the grub-liner. Ike was out to gyp Ricky by trading him an eight-year-old spoilt bronc. Ricky hooked him with a plug that seemed sound, yet right away went lame and never got over it. And when Ricky, in scarcely no time, broke the black to ride, was Ike mad!

He snorted around town how Ricky was a plumb useless drifter without no aim in life, so darned lazy he didn't take off his boots when he went to bed; a boozer, gambler, tricky horse trader and plain saddle tramp. Worst of all, Ike said, Ricky set the young folks a darned bad example.

Ike set a good example. He said so himself, with a lot of swagger. Hadn't he and his wife worked like beavers

to build up a prosperous little outfit? They'd raised a family, too. Around his house, whatever Ike said was law. His wife hardly dast move or think without asking him could she. That kind of an overbearing old cuss he was.

Well, Gilson's Diamond One was one ranch Ricky Carleton didn't stop at when Ike was home. But there came a time, last fall, a little less than a year ago now, when Ike wasn't home just a whole lot of the time. He'd slipped, and slipped bad, shedding those good habits he'd bragged about like a horse sheds hair in spring.

About this same time, Ricky Carleton got a most awful jolt. He was still out with the R K wagon—this same old wagon we're setting near—when one evening, he overheard a couple of rannies talking with the cook.

Shorty had just rode back from the home ranch and he had news. Hugh Benwell was all broke-up, so down in the dumps, Shorty was scared he never was going to snap out of it. Seemed that Hugh and his son Bob, a little past twenty-one, had had one heck of a row. Hugh had told the kid he was a shiftless, no-good jackanapes and he'd better take a tumble to himself. Bob got up on his ear, threw some hard words back at his dad, and then left home.

Said Bean Hole Bill, the cook, "I ain't s'prised none. I've seen the way Bob was a-headin'."

"Yeah?" asked Shorty. "And who's he copyin'?"

Slim spoke up quick, "Copyin' Ricky Carleton. Been doing it for six months."

That got Ricky right where he lived. He wandered off into the dark for some mighty serious thinking. Hugh Benwell, who'd done more for him than any man on earth, thought the sun rose and set in his son Bob, and now . . .

"Fool kid," Rocky probably muttered to himself. "Ike Gilson was right, darn him! I am a bad example for young folks. Bob's watched me get by with murder while I pretend to work—and never earn a dollar of the wages old Hugh pays me. Bob figures to get away with the same stuff. My fault that he's jabbing a knife in old Hugh's back. . . . But Janet Gilson can straighten out the cub."

ROAMING around as he did every winter, Ricky had his fingers on the pulse of everything that went on in this neck of the woods. So he knew how Janet Gilson liked Bob Benwell, and how Bob liked her. Sweetest girl you ever saw, Janet; dark, slender, pretty as a young deer against a clear lake as the sun goes down.

How's that, stranger? Sure I think a lot of Janet. . . . Do I know her well? Even better than I know Ricky Carleton!

Ricky caught up his own black horse, Foxy, and left the round-up without saying "Boo" to anybody. Since Hugh Benwell wasn't around, he didn't get his pay check, and he didn't find Bob in Osage, as he'd hoped. But he did see old Ike Gilson, being led round by the nose by a tinhorn who'd hit Osage six or eight months back. 'Twas surprising that any slick gambler could make a sucker of old Ike, yet Bart Akers was doing it.

Ricky tumbled to the tinhorn's system of taunting the salty old war horse: "Hell, man, you ain't got the sand to sit in another poker game with me, to try to get revenge."

Ike rose to that bait.

Akers got him to drinking the same way: "Haw-haw-ho! You call yourself a tough old buzzard. But you got to show me if you can pack your liquor like a man!"

And Ike'd flare, "Damn you, I'll show you!"

Ricky Carleton thought, "I hope Akers picks him clean; makes a bum out of the old cuss. As much of a bum as he says I am." Then he began to think about Ike Gilson's poor family and the idea idn't seem so plesant. Not pleasant a-tall.

Toward morning it snowed eight inches. But even a storm couldn't send Ike Gilson home to look after his cattle. That shows how the gambling fever had bit into him.

Ricky, heading into the livery stable to get Foxy, asked old Jake Warren about Bob Benwell. Bob was moseying round from one ranch to another, riding grub line, all the same as Ricky had done every winter. Howsoever, he'd told Jake he'd be in Osage this evening or tomorrow early.

"You got some competition now, grub-liner," said Jake Warren grinning.

Ricky didn't grin back.

When his horse was kicking up the loose snow on the road to the Diamond One, he wet his dry lips. All these years he'd dodged responsibility, work, trouble. Now he was horning into trouble because something wouldn't let him pass it by. Why the Sam Hill should he feel all this responsibility about Bob Benwell and Ike Gilson?

Less than a year ago when Ricky had ridden to the Diamond One, in the sheltered valley along Coon Creek, old Ike had rasped, "My house ain't open to saddle tramps. Git!"

Today it was different. Ike wasn't home and when Mrs. Gilson said, "You're more than welcome, Ricky," a lump swelled into the grub-liner's throat. He saw something was bothering the woman fierce, and he knew part of what the worry was. But not all of it. Not all.

Janet greeted the grub-liner pleasant enough, yet he wasn't a jiffy catching on that she was sorta offish. Like I told you, she's a dark, willowy girl with such a soft musical voice Ricky wondered—like a fella'll often wonder—how a raspy-voiced, ugly old pirate can have such a sweet daughter.

The two boys, Keith, thirteen, and Harry, fifteen, didn't try to hide their contemptuous "you're-a-darned-poor stick" attitude. Ricky felt this with a sharper bite than a calf feels a red-hot iron. In the grub-liner's everlasting roaming around and visiting folks, he'd developed a sixth sense for every little undercurrent of thought as well as the ability to read faces and eyes.

Anyhow, there was one of the family, besides Mrs. Gilson, who was tickled to see him—five-year-old Mary. Ricky took her in his arms and she gave him a kiss. Then she dabbed at her eyes and said, "When we saw you comin', I thought you was my daddy. I want my daddy. When's he comin' home?"

Mrs. Gilson lifted her apron to her face and turned into the house, and Ricky, his voice all husky, whispered, "He'll be home real soon, Mary. Tomorrow."

'Twas afternoon before the grub-liner, by helping Janet make butter, got his chance to talk to her alone. "How're you and Bob Benwell hitting it off nowadays?" sort of offhand like.

The flash in the girl's big dark eyes showed Ricky he'd touched the raw. "Let's not talk about it."

He tried again. "If you care anything about Bob, you've got to help me straighten him out."

"What gave you that idea? I don't care in the least about Bob Benwell. I've got no strings on him. Hope I never see him again, and I never will because—" Janet stopped.

Ricky reached her in two moves. He gripped her shoulders, looked into her eyes. "You won't see Bob again 'cause Ike Gilson has told him to ride a long ways round this ranch. On top of that, Ike's told you that when it's time for you to have a beau or think of getting married he'll pick out the right man for you. That right? I see it is."

"Ricky," the girl's voice had changed, "how can you know—"

He grinned his most fetching grin. "I know 'most everything, Janet."

"Then you know that, though my father likes and respects Hugh Benwell, he's got no use for Bob." The girl choked and two big tears wet her cheeks. "You see, Dad says Bob's getting just like you, Ricky. And it's true. Since he left home, I've seen him just once at a neighbor's. He's changed. Oh, Ricky,

Bob does like me, yet I couldn't convince him his ideas are all haywire."

Ricky stopped smiling. "*You* couldn't reason with the young idiot? That's—"

"He's not an idiot!"

"I'd hoped you could reason with him. But now what the devil are we going to do?"

Janet's answer stung the grub-liner. "If you do anything at all, it'll be the first time you ever did. Why, of all the riders in this country, must Bob choose you for an example?"

"One of those things you can't explain," said Ricky and a few choice cuss words almost got past his lips.

HE WAS helping the two Gilson boys with the chores that evening when his sixth sense got its first smell of another hair-trigger situation there on the Diamond One. Keith and Harry stopped sawing wood, while Keith tossed a question at the visitor:

"Grub-liner, can you throw a gun any better'n you can an ax?"

"I never thought much about it."

Ricky caught the boys swapping sly grins. Then Harry pointed out the hired man, Herb Rothwell, doing other chores around the stable.

"Herb sure can make a smoke-stick talk. He's a rip-tooter, Herb is. He's rid with the wild bunch!"

"Easy, Harry!" warned young Keith. "Ma'll hear you."

"Heck! I ain't a-carin' if she does. Come spring and green grass, me and Herb's goin' to hit out for the badlands. Herb says any cowpuncher that'll stick round a dinky ranch and feed cattle and do chores is plain locoed."

Ricky nodded as if he agreed. "I'll betcha Herb knows a lot of ways to make heaps of jack dead easy," he offered.

"You said it! Me and Herb's goin' to join up with Trig Norton and his gunnies in the badlands."

Keith asked plenty eager, "You savvy how to load dice, Ricky? Herb showed us, only I didn't catch on quite."

Ricky, packing wood to the house, must've chuckled to himself. 'Twould be a good joke on Ike Gilson if his own boys followed the lead of a two-bit tough like Herb Rothwell. The chuckle died on a rasping note. Anything like that would cut Janet like a knife; it would almost kill Mrs. Gilson. Just the same, this darned funny mess was no skin off Ricky's nose. He wouldn't try to do one thing about it. Not a thing.

Then why, at the supper table did he study big, rough-hewn Herb Rothwell? Maybe he was wondering how much sand the coyote-eyed braggart might have in his craw. Or maybe he was searching his memory for all the dope he had on Herb Rothwell. And on Trig Norton, outlaw, as well.

The meal over, the boys followed Rothwell to the bunkhouse. Watching their mother, Ricky saw her start to call them back and evidently change her mind. Her eyes and her anxious face told him she knew what was happening—and was being plain tortured by it.

While Mrs. Gilson and Janet did the dishes, Ricky whittled out a wooden doll for small Mary. Holding the child on his lap, he told her a story as he dressed the doll. "There we are. All finished. We'll call her Jeanie, and you can take her to bed with you."

"Oo-oh, she's nice, Ricky. You're nice, too. But I wish my daddy was here to kiss me. He always kisses me goodnight. Why ain't my daddy here?"

As Janet took the little girl away to bed, Ricky heard her troubled sigh. He looked at Mrs. Gilson and saw the lines in her face taut, her eyes dry and hot.

"Can't you fire Herb Rothwell?" he asked blunt.

"So you've seen what he's doing to my boys!" The woman's hands gripped hard on some sewing she was trying to do. "Yes, I can fire Herb. But it would make matters worse."

"Worse? How come? At least you'd get rid of him."

"If I send the fellow down the road,

Keith and Harry will still consider him a hero. Even as a martyr perhaps. I think you can understand."

Ricky lifted his eyebrows and lifted himself from his chair. "I get it. Now, stop worrying, Mrs. Gilson. I'll blow Herb Rothwell wide open." A brittle laugh. "And there ain't no danger of your boys copyin' me!"

But wasn't there danger of just that, he more than likely wondered as he walked across the snow-covered yard. If so, then Ricky'd have to change his way of life, cuss it! In the bunkhouse, lighted by one dim lamp and a wood fire roaring in the box stove, he found Herb Rothwell spilling a big windy to the Gilson boys.

Seeing Ricky in the doorway, Herb sneered, "Well, if the old sissy grub-liner ain't decided to join us men. Set, Ricky, and pin back your ears. I was tellin' the kids how Trig Norton shot his way out of a scrape in Red Bend."

Keith asked, "Was it Trig done all that? I somehow thought it was you, Herb."

Ricky chuckled and snapped his fingers. "And no wonder, Keith. Herb's been in so many fights, he forgets whether it's him or some other two-bit bandit he's talking about."

" 'Two-bit bandit'!" Like as if a wasp had stung him, Rothwell was on his feet and facing Ricky. "You mean me or Trig Norton?"

"I mean both of you! Boys, you can ask anyone, and they'll tell you the same stories about this brave, noble gent, Trig Norton. One day he murdered a snow-blind prospector to get the poor old fella's little poke of dust. Then, again, Trig shot Tom Polk, rancher, as he was dying; shot him in the back! That's Trig Norton for you. A real he-man. A *good* guy. A hero!"

Rothwell had advanced on Ricky. Eyes blazing, jaw clamped, fists doubled, he stopped. All these late years Ricky had dodged fist fights as he had dodged work, worry, responsibility, and Herb looked as if he could eat him alive.

Rothwell's mouth twisted in a snarl. "Keep your nose outa this, saddle tramp! I'm bad medicine. I'm tough and I won't take nothin' from—"

Ricky stood his ground, hurled his challenge. "You'll take anything I hand you. You'll take it because you're a yellow cur!"

In the background the two boys were wooden figures, only their wide-open eyes moving. The cords in Rothwell's neck stood out in knots. "Git, before I bust you in two!"

And Ricky Carleton taunted him. "If petty thieving and cheating at cards and using loaded dice is hero stuff, you're right there with bells on, Herb." His right hand flashed up and out. Smack! He slapped the man's twitching face. Hard.

Rothwell didn't strike back and into the following silence burst little Harry Gilson's voice, shrill and loud. "He said you was yellow, Herb. Tear into him!"

For a second longer Ricky held the man with his eyes. A deadlock. Then Rothwell jabbed his fists in his pockets and turned. "Aw," a sullen mutter. "This ain't no place for a fight."

Neither Gilson boy said one word as the fellow put on his cap, his coat and his overshoes, slung his warsack over his shoulder and, with as much swagger as he could summon, flung out of the bunkhouse.

Harry, Keith and Ricky saw him stop at the main house and call, "Gimme my time, Mrs. Gilson."

Not till he'd disappeared, wading through the snow toward Osage, did Harry Jilson let his tight breath run out. "Well, gosh, Ricky, you sure showed that coyote up as a false alarm!"

"And Trig Norton, too!" added Keith.

Ricky probably was experiencing a fierce exultation, the more amazing because so new and strange. He'd maybe found out something about himself he hadn't known till now. He could stand up to a man—one well able to whip him if the fellow'd had the sand—and make him take water. But he'd made a reputation with the Gilson boys that—great grief!—he'd have to live up to now.

Already Keith was asking, "Ricky, will you show me how to braid four plait square? I want to make me a pair of square bridle reins outa strings cut from old boot tops."

"And will you tie a Turk's head knot on the end of my quirt?" Harry put in as if— Well, as if Ricky'd only do that for him he'd be the happiest kid on earth.

So until after midnight Ricky Carleton tied knots and braided leather strings. Even then the boys didn't want to let him go to bed and, as far as sleeping or even resting was concerned, he might as well not have bedded down at all.

FTER breakfast, the family gathered around him and his horse to tell him good-by, and an odd mist came into the grub-liner's eyes. His voice was playing tricks on him, too, for when Harry lifted little Mary to kiss Ricky's cheek and the child said, "'Member you said my daddy'd come home today," Ricky coughed his answer, "So I did. He will."

But he didn't dare to look at Mrs. Gilson or Janet. He didn't see how he could possibly send Ike Gilson home. Nor did he see how he could straighten matters out between Janet and Bob Benwell.

Doggone it! With Ike Gilson at home, Ricky's welcome on the Diamond One would be ended. Why not let cantankerous, unreasonable old Ike neglect his family and go to the devil his own way?

Bob Benwell, on the other hand, wasn't very old or very wise or very set in his ways. A fellow might be able to pound some horse sense into Bob's head. As for bracing up to Ike Gilson and saying, "Look here, old-timer, your family's suffering because you're making a damn fool of yourself. Three hundred cattle ain't much of a herd, after all, and it takes all the jack you can make on the Diamond One to keep things going," and so on. Well, Ricky knew how far he'd get. He might as well argue with a barbed wire fence.

The old rancher would surely begin to paw and snort, and he'd roar, "It sure sets good with me to have a worthless saddle tramp tellin' me what I should do. Like as if you didn't blow in every dime you get; like's if you was a model for anybody to pattern after! Hell, I ain't got nothin' but contempt for—"

Right at that point, Ricky Carleton no doubt lifted his bridle hand and stopped Foxy on the snow trail that twisted out across the sagebrush flat. He must've give a great laugh and slapped one mittened hand on his chap-clad leg. Like a flash it probably come to him how he could work on Ike Gilson and handle the cranky old settler without Ike's realizing he was even being handled. And Bob Benwell fitted into the scheme, too!

After this, Ricky lost no time along the road to Osage. Riding into the livery stable, he grinned friendly at Jake Warren, asked, "What's new? Any excitement in town?"

"Yeh, consid'able excitement. Old Ike Gilson's greasin' the skids under himself. He was drunker'n seven hundred dollars last night and a-gamblin' plumb wild."

"You don't say? Ike sleeping it off some place now?"

"Prob'ly. He's got room twenty-seven to the hotel, and he ain't showed up yet this mornin'. Ricky, what the hell's got into Ike Gilson?"

Ricky shrugged. "Same thing as gets into me sometimes, I reckon. Then, too, Bart Akers' system is sure fire, taunting the old longhorn, daring him, challenging him. Ike rises to that sort of bait. . . . Bob Benwell in town?"

"Bob was in last night. He left for Lawson early this mornin'. Not actin' nat'ral a-tall, that young feller wasn't. Told me he wasn't comin' back. Not ever."

Now Ricky had promised little Mary Gilson that her daddy would come home today. Besides he felt he couldn't risk old Ike's getting into another game with Bart Akers. Not after the way Jake Warren had said Ike was plunging. But

Bob Benwell must be brought back to Osage Basin and back to his senses, or else Hugh Benwell would never get over it. Neither would Janet. On top of that Bob himself might never amount to a tinker's cuss unless he was set on the right track, *muy pronto.*

All that went through Ricky's head in thirty seconds. Then he swung to his saddle, turned Foxy outa the stable and amazed the old gelding with ripping spurs. There was a chance he could overtake Bob.

Foxy looked like he'd been through a cloudburst of mud—the fresh snow was melting and the ground under it soft. And Ricky's chaps looked the same, and Ricky's weather-beaten face was plenty grim when at last he swept up on Bob Benwell, twenty miles out on the road to the railroad town of Lawson.

IRST off, Bob's face must've lighted when he saw who'd come fogging after him, then he scowled and snapped, "Now don't start tellin' me I've made a fool of myself and that I've got to go home. The ranchers I've visited, ridin' the grub line, ain't said so in words. But I know that's exactly what they were thinkin'."

"You're fed up on riding the grub line?" Ricky asked brief.

"Yes. Folks took me in all right, but the way they looked at me, so queer like, got under my hide."

"Uh-huh," said Ricky. "You figured it would be a grand life. But the ranchers didn't accept you like they do me; didn't treat you like they do me. . . . Come on. We're goin' back."

Bob flared up. Darned if he was going back. He couldn't ride grub line, and he just wouldn't go crawling to old Hugh Benwell. Not after the row they'd—

Ricky cut him off. "I savvy all that, savvy it even though I ain't supposed to have no pride myself. But, Bob, we can save your face, and things'll work out hunky if you'll just go to work for Ike Gilson."

Lots of hot color ran up into Bob's face for a reason 'twasn't hard to guess. "Between you and me, Ricky, I'd like that the best of anything I can think of. I'd work too. But Ike won't let me come on his ranch, to say nothin' of hirin' me."

"I'll fix it," said Ricky.

"You'll fix it? Hold on! You know darned well that old rip-snorter hates you more than he does a horse thief."

"Yeah," Ricky agreed, dry. "I'm counting strong on just that contempt."

Then he told Bob Benwell what he was to do. When Bob agreed with a joyful whoop, the two of 'em hit the trail for Osage lickety-cut. Yet they didn't ride in together, for Ricky didn't want to be seen with Bob just then.

It was past two o'clock when Ricky stabled Foxy and kicked out of his muddy chaps. He must've been sweating for fear Ike Gilson was up and around with Bart Akers.

Howsoever, hoping Ike was still a-bed, Ricky got a pot of tea at the Chink Beanery. But he didn't drink it. Instead he poured the tea into an empty whiskey bottle, and soon afterwards slipped up the back stairs of the hotel. So far as he could tell no one saw him go into room twenty-seven. No one except the half-dressed, whiskery old codger who lay on the bed there.

Ike Gilson lifted his head. His bleary eyes grew savage. His voice was thick, harsh, bitter. "You, huh? Git out!"

Ricky made an impudent face at him. "Phew! You sure need some fresh air in here. How you feelin', Ike?"

"None o' your business. Git!"

"Have a drink!" Ricky pulled out his bottle of tea.

"Not with you, loafer!"

Ricky'd counted on that refusal. "Then I'll have one myself." He took a long pull at the bottle. "Wow! That's tarantula juice."

"Haa! Just a drunken bum!" said Ike, plenty barbed wire.

"You know it," chuckled Ricky, and as if the big juice was working already. "Sa-ay, you and me ish two of a kind.

Blow our dough for whishkey. You'n me buck the tiger if we can. Other times we shoot dice, play poker."

"Huh!" Ike Gilson roared. He sat up and began to button his shirt, his big hands fumbling, shaking. "You got the nerve to say you and me are alike?"

"Yesh, Ike, ol' pal, two of a kind. Thash reminds me why for I come to youish."

"I'm goin' to throw you out!"

"No, no-o, Ike, you won't chuck out your fu-future son-in-law."

"Son-in-law? Meanin' you?" Ike Gilson seemed to hit the ceiling and then his feet hit the floor.

"Sure! You'll be real proudish of me. So much like you, y' know. Might want to stake me to a spread of my own."

"Stake you!" rapped the old settler. "Maybe 'cause I've got a bustin' headache I ain't hearin' right."

"You're hearing right enough, Ike." Ricky lurched over to the only chair and flopped down on it. "Them hangover headaches ish mean. I'll have one myshelf t'morrow. Where wash we? Oh, yesh! 'Coursh 'tain't all settled yet, Dad. I—"

"'Dad'! Blast you, Ricky, I've stood about all—"

Ricky waved a friendly hand. "'Coursh you'll insist on me callin' you 'Dad'. Reckon I'll drop out to the Diamond One again thish evenin' and—"

"If you come on my ranch, Ricky Carleton, I'll fill your hide full of lead!"

The grub-liner looked wiser'n an owl. "Ha-ha, ain't scarin' me a bit, Ike, old hoss. Nowadays you ain't never t'home!"

"Don't you go bankin' on that, you—you counterfeit! You no-good saddle tramp."

Pretending surprise, Ricky said, "Sa-ay, if you're going to act hosh-hoshtile, I'll sure pick timesh to call when you ain't there. And I don't mean maybe!"

"I'll be there! Get out!"

"Ha! I ain't worried none about you bein' there much! You're too busy blowin' your dough and having a good time."

HALF an hour later, Ricky was at the livery stable with Bob Benwell when Ike Gilson came storming across the street ready to travel. Not wanting Jake Warren to see this next act, Ricky and Bob had managed to get rid of him; and now Ricky stepped behind a partition, leaving Bob alone to meet the on-the-prod rancher.

Said Bob, "Mr. Gilson, I've heard that Herb Rothwell quit at the Diamond One last night. Can I get his job?"

Old Gilson roared, "Why, you're Hugh Benwell's sprout. A job? *A job?* Hey, I told you to keep off the Diamond One. What'd you say? Herb Rothwell quit?"

Ricky bounced out where Ike could see him, and put in his ace. "That's right, Ike, you got no hired man. But since I'll be taking an active hand managing the Diamond One from now on, I'll be darned if I'll let you hire this Benwell kid. He's a no-good punk!"

Ike's face was a forest fire. He stepped back gasping for air and, like a wolf in a corner, Bob turned on Ricky. "What's that? You're taking an active hand on the Diamond One? And I'm a no-good punk!"

"You heard me. I'm telling you to ride a long ways around the Diamond One."

Ike Gilson found his voice and exploded: "You're tellin' Bob to ride round the Diamond One! Bob, I ain't backin' that—that booze-swillin' saddle tramp's hand. Hit him! Sock him! Make him swallow—"

And Bob Benwell socked Ricky. Like range stallions they tore into each other, floundering over saddles piled in the runway of the stable, crashing into buckboards and other rigs. Ricky had ordered Bob to make the fight hot and lay it on heavy, and it was all it seemed to be!

Out of the corner of one eye that would soon turn black, Ricky saw old Ike jumping up and down, waving his

arms, clapping his hands and whopping for Bob Benwell.

For four or five minutes the grub-liner handed the younger man as good as he sent. Then suddenly Ricky pretended to stumble over a saddle, dropped, and lay still.

Ike Gilson howled, "Stand on your legs and fight, you counterfeit!"

"Licked," mumbled Ricky. "Let me 'lone."

Old Ike slapped Bob on the back. "Say, boy, that pleased me like nothin' else could have. Was I askin' to see that tramp get his needin's! By George, kid, you're sure right there. . . . Come on out to the Diamond One!"

Ricky Carleton pulled himself up from among the saddles to watch the two of them ride out of Osage side by each. But of course Ricky missed out on seeing the welcome old Ike and young Bob got on the Diamond One. That's something I'll never forget as long as I live, 'specially little Mary snuggling into her daddy's arms and the darned old codger actually crying as she patted his cheeks. Nor how Janet's face outdid any sunrise when she saw Bob Benwell; how she was all worried concern about him having a black eye and must doctor it right away; and how Bob enjoyed that doctoring.

There was a little something else Bob and Janet enjoyed perhaps even more. That was hearing Ike tell Mrs. Gilson, "I've picked the fellow for our Janet, Mother. It's Bob Benwell. Good stuff in that boy."

What'd you say, stranger. . . ? Oh, you don't see how I can know anything about all that? Besides, you're more interested in Ricky.

Well, Ricky didn't have anybody to doctor his black eye, and it was a dinger, too. He didn't have anybody at all to make a fuss over him. But something had happened inside him. Deep, deep inside. So, even though Foxy was nigh wore-out from the wild chase to bring Bob Benwell back, he forked the old black horse and moseyed out across the snowy world to Hugh Benwell's home ranch.

Hugh was at home acting just as chipper as a cow in a bog hole—like he'd lost all interest in life. He gave Ricky a sour look and growled, "I s'pose you've come in for your pay check. . . . Where'd you pick up the black eye?"

Ricky grinned his old mischievous, fetching grin; the grin that always got next to Hugh Benwell and made the old cowman sorry after he'd bawled Ricky out fierce or fired him, and Ricky said:

"Hugh, I might as well tell you, your cub just licked hell outa me, which oughta show you plain that he's come to his senses. On top of that, he's got a job with Ike Gilson. Knowing Janet, you know dad-blamed well that's the best thing that could happen to Bob."

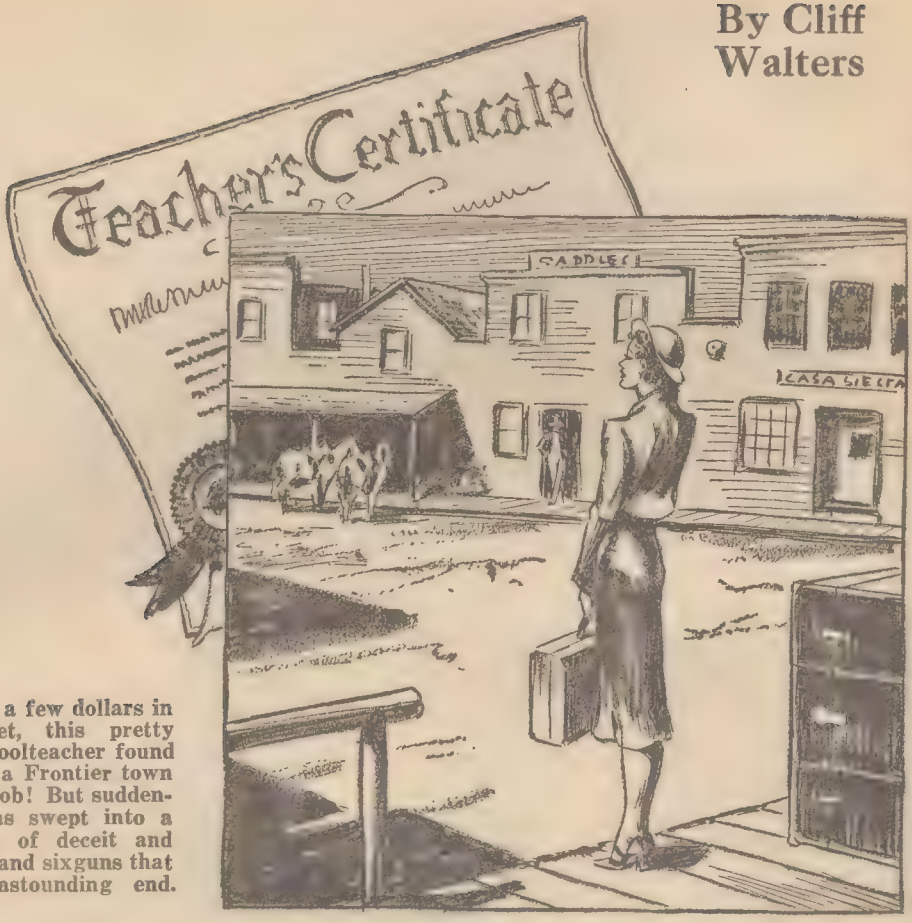
It was like watching a wilted bush after it'd got water to see the change in the old man. He started to speak but Ricky interrupted, "Hold your horses a second, Hugh, till I give you the second barrel. I'm asking you to keep me on the payroll. You're looking at a cowhand who wants to work!"

THAT'S all, Mister, 'cept only that while I've been yarning you've noticed how bunches of cattle, hazed along by cowboys, have been pouring into one big herd on yonder bunch ground. The boys'll be loping to camp for dinner *muy pronto,* so you'll get to meet the new wagon boss of the old R K. That wagon boss is Ricky Carleton, and Hugh Benwell says he's now a real cowman.

What's my job? Oh, Ike Gilson had to send a rep to this round-up for the Diamond One. I'm that rep. But I won't be with Ike much longer. Going to get married to Janet this month and move back home to the old R K.

What was the question, sir? How's it happen I can tell Ricky's story almost as if it was my own? Well, I was his buddy, you see; the guy who Ike Gilson still thinks that he himself picked out for his daughter!

By Cliff Walters



With only a few dollars in her pocket, this pretty young schoolteacher found herself in a Frontier town —and no job! But suddenly she was swept into a maelstrom of deceit and treachery and sixguns that had an astounding end.

Heart Teacher

I

ALTHOUGH it was early in the morning, the September sun was so glaringly bright on the warped planking of the depot platform that Claire Taylor, the slim, russet-haired girl who had just stepped off the train, blinked her hazel eyes as she tried to appraise the little town of Sandbar. With that appraisal, a sharp little twinge of dismay assailed the girl. The paintless, sun-suffering buildings, strung here along the bend of the Bison River, somehow looked like the remnants of a drought-stricken herd of cattle which had been too weak to get away from the water hole.

And that terrible old log building set apart from the rest of the town—could *that* be the schoolhouse? It must be! At least, it had a makeshift bell tower and—

Claire's attention turned toward a plump, overalled man who was leaving the livery barn across the street, and making his leisurely way toward the platform. Close enough for speaking, he said:

"I'm Gus Tanner, head of the school

board, miss. And, if I ain't mistaken, you're Miss Claire Taylor, the new schoolmarm."

Nodding her russet-colored head, and trying her best to muster a smile, Claire answered, "You're right, Mr. Tanner. I'm reporting for work and hope that—"

"And I've been hopin' you'd—"

"Hey, Gus!" interrupted the voice of a broad-shouldered, young man who, in front of the livery barn across the street, had started hitching a team of rangy, well matched bays to a buckboard. "Come here!"

"Excuse me a minute, Miss Taylor." Promptly Gus Tanner headed across the street, leaving Claire standing there on the sun-cursed platform. But the girl didn't have long to wait. Soon Gus Tanner was returning again, accompanied now by the young man whom he introduced as Barth Marshall. The latter, sandy-haired and with a pair of keen blue eyes, said:

"Too bad you came all the way up here from Cheyenne, only to find that you're not needed at Sandbar."

"What?" That word almost caught in Claire's throat. Not needed here! Traveling three hundred miles, standing here with exactly nine dollars in her pocketbook and now. . . . "Just what do you mean? I'm not needed? But I have Mr. Tanner's last letter here. One in which he states, positively, that I'm hired to teach—"

"Sorry about that part, Miss Taylor." Gus Tanner shifted his excessive weight from one runover boot to the other. "My niece from over Bendtown way showed up yesterday, and since she qualified to teach grade school—well, you know how it is."

"Yes, I know exactly how it is!" Claire's hazel eyes, beautiful eyes, took on fire so bright they rivaled the intense sunlight. "Blood's thicker than water! And your word isn't worth the paper it's written on. But you'll pay my expenses up here or—"

"Maybe you're luckier than you think," said young Barth Marshall, smiling. "The Marshall ranch, our Crossbow outfit up in Bear-track Basin, needs a schoolteacher for the eighteen or twenty kids whose fathers ride for Dad and me. Sixty a month, and room and board. And it's a darned sight prettier place than Sandbar. If you need a job, you're hired."

Young Barth Marshall didn't have to persuade. Just ten minutes later, with her cheap trunk in the buckboard, and with gratitude in her heart, Claire was riding away from Sandbar; riding toward the distant mountains which were already beginning to assume that haziness which suggested the coming of Indian Summer.

"A team like these bays shorten a long road, Miss Taylor," said her husky, pleasant companion. "I only hope you're not too disappointed in losing the Sandbar school."

"Sandbar!" She shuddered. "I'm glad to be leaving it and heading toward the higher range. You—you don't talk quite like the average cowman, Mr. Marshall."

"Well, Dad sent me East to school," he answered. "The Marshalls are firm believers in education. That's why I'm so happy to have found you. Lucky kids, the sons and daughters of the Crossbow punchers."

"Why are you so sure of that?" she countered, smiling.

"Because I can see that you're intelligent. Too, those kids will be glad to go to school now—if it's only to gaze upon their beautiful new teacher." He laughed quietly. "Darned if I don't wish I were a kid again."

Claire turned her oval face away, gazed across vast hills stretching into the horizon. She flushed a little at the tribute Barth Marshall had paid her, and wondered what on earth she would have done if this smiling, sandy-haired young cowman hadn't happened along just when he did.

Late afternoon saw the buckboard topping a ridge which brought into sight, rather breath-taking sight, the far-flung acres of Bear-track Basin, a

mountain-girt range dotted with bunches of grazing cattle, and threaded with twisting, silver creeks which winked through fringes of willow and cottonwood.

"Like it?" asked Barth Marshall.

"It's grand!" she exclaimed. "Oh, so much more beautiful than that hideous little badland town of Sandbar that it seems like Paradise itself. I—I don't know whether to call you Mr. Marshall—or Santa Claus!"

"Suppose you just compromise by calling me Barth," he replied, laughing. "Those are the Crossbow buildings over there beyond Cub Creek."

Although born and raised on the range, Claire was a bit awed by the magnitude of this remote cattle empire. Those buildings over there constituted a town larger than Sandbar. Most imposing of all was the Marshall home, a spacious structure of log and stone which overlooked from a slight rise the lesser buildings, the cabins where the Crossbow riders lived with their families, the long bunkhouse which was home to the unmarried punchers; the acres of corrals, the barns, blacksmith shop and little schoolhouse.

"Now what the—" Barth Marshall stopped the weary team abruptly, and Claire saw two riders, one pursuing the other, come dashing from the cedar-studded slope above the road; a mad, desperate race that ended not fifty feet away from the halted buckboard.

The pursuer, the tall, dark-haired man on the fleet sorrel horse had overtaken his quarry, the big man on the puffing gray horse. With a bulldogger's leap, the rider of the sorrel grasped the bigger man around the body, jerked the latter from his saddle. There was the impact of two bodies thudding to the earth. Then both men were on their feet.

Oaths spewing from his lips, the bigger man rushed his leaner adversary. Claire saw, and heard, the thud of fists. From the buckboard seat, Barth Marshall was yelling something at "Jake." But Jake, the big man, was too busy to hear. He was absorbing blows from the most vicious fists that Claire Taylor had ever seen swung in battle.

The girl shuddered at the cool fury of the dark-haired man, at the wolf-like way he fought—savagely, mercilessly, intently. Six feet tall, wide of shoulder, lean-hipped, he was built for battle; and battle he did. From his lightning-fast fists sped blows that knocked breath from his opponent's body, that battered and beat the bigger man into a reeling insensibility. Then that fierce right swung out to end the fray, a blow that snapped the loser's head back and sent him tumbling into defeat.

"What's the matter with you and Jake?" yelled Barth Marshall. "And what are you doing over here on Crossbow range, Cameron?"

"Maybe you'd like to throw me off, you yellow scum?" Cameron turned and moved toward the buckboard.

When he was so close that Claire could see the flame of anger dancing in his gray eyes, he added, "Keep your vandals away from the Meadow Crick place, Marshall. Jake Weir cut the wires in my pasture fence this afternoon and let a bunch of horses out. If he ever tries it again, I'll twist a barbed wire around his dirty neck."

"Oh, calm down," Barth Marshall said. "Dad and I have both told our riders to keep clear of Meadow Creek, but we can't trail them around, watch them like a sheepherder watches his flock, just to—"

"If you're lyin' for the sake of the pretty girl there," said Tim Cameron, strong jaw still deadly grim, "save your breath. I know what orders you give your riders—certain riders that ain't hired just to punch cows. If you was alone, Marshall, I'd tell you a few things you need tellin'. But that can wait. Besides, you can guess what I'd say." Abruptly Tim Cameron turned away and headed for his heaving sorrel horse.

His course took him close to the big man, Jake, who was struggling to his feet. Like a springing wolf, Cameron leaped at the bigger man again and landed that long right swing. Again Jake collapsed, sprawled on the ground and lay still.

"Now, now," soothed Barth Marshall to Claire. "What are you trembling about? Maybe that riled nester will teach Jake Weir a lesson."

"A nester?" echoed the girl, watching Tim Cameron mount his sorrel and ride away.

"Yes. He lives over there where Meadow Creek comes tumbling out of the mountains." With his buggy whip, Barth Marshall pointed to a patch of green on the far side of Beartrack Basin.

"I see. Well, if you want to load your rider, Jake, into the buckboard and take him home—"

"Oh, he'll come around," said the cowman, clucking at his team. "When he does, he can muse upon his mistaken ways. Later, I'll find out the truth about the fence cutting. If Jake did cut Cameron's pasture fence, I'll fire him. If he didn't—well, I'll take that up with Cameron."

If Claire didn't like to ride on and leave an unconscious man lying there by the roadside, at least she approved of her companion's fairness. Claire knew the resentment most cowmen harbored against nesters who encroached on cattle domain. Never before had she heard of a rider getting fired for bothering a homesteader.

Later Claire found out that she was not to occupy a room in the spacious home of the Marshalls. Brusque, iron-gray old Phil Marshall, the master of Bear-track Basin, tersely informed her that she would room and board in the ancient log house where lived Dave Harrington, the range foreman, and his middle-aged wife.

"Understand one thing, Miss Taylor," said the elder Marshall in that blunt, adamant way of his. "You stay all winter long, tend to your job and tend to it right, or don't bother to unpack your things. And no romancing with the cowpunchers. That causes jealousy and fights. Frankly, I wish you weren't so good-looking."

"Well," said Claire, "I suppose I could scar my face up some with hot branding irons if you—"

She stopped abruptly. Those steel-blue eyes of the elderly cowman were silencing her, letting her know that Phil Marshall took back talk from no one. Nor did Claire wish to antagonize him. She needed every dollar she could earn this winter. With only nine dollars in her purse, with the railroad forty miles away and with no other job in sight, Claire was prudent.

II

THERE was no respite for Claire, the prettiest teacher who had ever taught in the little log schoolhouse at the Crossbow. At eight o'clock the next morning she was at work dispensing books among the nineteen pupils who, from six to sixteen years of age, came milling into the small building. At last the motley crew was assigned to seats and classified.

Claire was flustered by the confusion of that first day—her first day of teaching. Not only because her charges, wild and unsettled after months of romping free across the range of Beartrack Basin, were hard to manage; but because whenever she looked at a printed page she would invariably see a lean, wind-bronzed face brightened by the flame of rageful gray eyes—the face of a nester who had fought with the fierceness of a wild thing.

But, at last, that first day of school was over; and the sons and daughters of Crossbow workers had gone whooping toward freedom when Barth Marshall peered into the schoolhouse door and called:

"May I stay after school, dear teacher?"

"Hello, Barth," Claire smiled. "I've been wondering about Jake Weir. Did he get home? And did you find out if he—"

"He's fired," said the young man.

"Oh! Then he did cut Tim Cameron's fence!"

"He did. But why are you so interested?"

"Just curious," she answered. "I wonder how much the Crossbow would charge me for the use of a horse and saddle? I love to ride. After being cooped up all day, it's nice to get out."

"Right you are, auburn-haired lady. By the time you can get over to the Harrington home and change to your riding duds, I'll be there with the saddle horses. You're welcome any time to an extra saddle of mine. And a little black horse I call Cricket."

Soon Claire had changed to her riding duds. But Barth Marshall didn't accompany her on the ride. Old Phil Marshall summoned his son to the ranch office.

"Shall I wait for you, Barth?" Claire asked.

"No," he answered disappointedly. "When the old gent starts pawing over business matters, he doesn't know when to stop."

Thus, it was alone that Claire headed northward from the Crossbow, but she didn't ride in that direction very long. Letting the high-lifed black horse strike a lope, she swerved westward. And not without destination. She was heading for those green and fertile acres where Meadow Creek came brawling from the stone jaws of a canyon.

An hour later the girl had reached those acres which were dotted with stacks of wild hay. Never had Claire seen a prettier spot, or wild hay growing so thick and rank as it grew here. Slowly she rode, or started to ride, past the cabin and corrals on the creek bank. Startled, she heard a childish voice piping from a clump of willows beside the trail:

"Hey, Tim! Riders!"

"Well, young man," gasped Claire, now halting her pony and eying the eight-year-old lad who clutched a willow fishing pole in one hand, and who held a string of trout in the other, "why that warning to your father?"

"He ain't my father!" snorted the shaggy-haired youngster disgustedly. "Tim's my brother. What you doin' here?"

There was suspicion in the lad's gray eyes, hostility in his tone; and a set to his firm, good-looking mouth that reminded Claire of a fighter she had seen in action yesterday. But the girl's smile had a way of dispelling chill. She smiled now as she replied:

"I'm just out for a ride." She glanced across the creek, saw Tim Cameron, hand on his low-swung gun, heading this way from the cabin.

"Oh, you!" grunted the tall man who had so decisively vanquished big Jake Weir yesterday. "What do you want? And who's with you?"

"I'm alone," Claire answered calmly. "I'm the new schoolteacher over at the Crossbow. My name is Claire Taylor. And I didn't come here looking for a gun battle, so please take your hand away from your six-shooter, Mr. Cameron. Yes, and tell me why this little fisherman wasn't at school today."

"School? At the Crossbow?" young Billie Cameron blurted. "Gosh sakes, Tim! Listen to her!"

"Why?" Claire countered. "What's so terribly unusual about a boy of your age going to school?"

"Did the Marshall tribe send you over here to invite Billie Cameron to go to school?" demanded Tim, his eyes holding Claire in their steady gaze. "You needn't answer, Miss Taylor. They'd no more let him in that schoolhouse than they'd—well, than they'd let me alone. Old Man Marshall ain't payin' out good money to educate his enemies."

"I'll bet I can arrange to have Billie come to school."

"Don't bother," was Tim Cameron's curt reply.

"I wouldn't," Claire answered levelly. "Not so far as you're concerned. But when it comes to denying a boy the privilege of school, and just because of some squabble between nesters and cowmen—"

"Who's a nester?" Tim Cameron clicked. He turned, pointed to a small knoll beyond the creek, one from which loomed three crude headstones. "My grandfather's in one of those graves. My dad's in one—and my mother's in the other. They were the *first* settlers in this basin. And you pratin' about nesters!"

Claire swallowed hard. "Well, I understood Barth to say that—"

"Don't believe everything you hear from the lips of liars—and murderers!" he answered.

"Murderers?" she echoed unsteadily.

"If they hadn't been, Dad wouldn't be in that grave over there," came his low reply. "Nor maybe a couple other small ranchers that were in this basin long before buzzard Marshall ever saw it—and wanted it worse'n a coyote wants to sink his fangs in calf meat! Marshall bought some of 'em out—for his own price. He hired the others killed off. Hired Jett Dalhorn, an outlaw, and a couple of Dalhorn's cronies, to do the killin'."

"Yes?" said Claire, incredulously. "If the Marshalls are such enemies, why did they fire Jake Weir, the man who cut your fence?"

"Fire Jake Weir?" The young man's eyes hardened. "I'll believe that when I see Weir missin' from Bear-track Basin."

"But I tell you they did fire Weir!"

"Yeah? Then who's that scoutin' around up there on that ridge?"

Claire shifted her gaze quickly, barely glimpsed a vanishing rider who might never have been noticed if it hadn't been for those keen, alert eyes of Tim Cameron. She glanced back at Tim, saw his body tense as he said to his kid brother:

"You go in the cabin, Billie. Stay there till I get back. Apparently the pretty teacher's hired for more'n just teachin' kids. She came over here to entertain us while coyote Weir—" Cameron didn't finish. With a sharp, contemptuous look at Claire, he was gone; moving toward the corral and his fleet sorrel horse.

Stunned by the accusation he had flung over his broad shoulder, Claire watched Tim saddle his sorrel and line out toward the ridge where a prowling rider had been seen.

Wondering what Tim Cameron would find up there, Claire wheeled her pony and followed. Before she gained the top of that ridge over which he had already vanished, she heard the sound of shots. Her heartbeat quickened. Suppose one of those shots struck Tim Cameron? What would become of eight-year-old Billie? What would become of these many haystacks and the acres that—

Urging the little black to a still faster pace, Claire found herself suddenly descending toward a little horse pasture cupped between two ridges. Then she saw something else that made her pulses skip—a sorrel horse lying flat on the grassy turf; and, beside that horse, the still form of the tall rider who had ridden him only a few short minutes before.

"Tim!" Claire said.

Soon she was there beside Tim Cameron, bending over him, pressing her handkerchief to the cut above his right temple. His eyes fluttered open, roved wildly for an instant, then focused hard on the girl's face.

"You—you're not shot?" she quavered.

"No." His voice was flat, toneless. "My sorrel was, though. Which means I'm borrowin' a Crossbow horse!"

Forcing strength into his shocked muscles, ignoring the cut which his bad fall against a rock had given him, he mounted the black pony, Cricket,

and spurred away in the direction of the mountains.

"Oh, you fight-crazy fool!" cried the girl. "Haven't you sense enough to know. . . ." Her voice trailed off. Tears brimmed to her hazel eyes. Then she turned, started walking toward the Crossbow which was five long miles away.

She wondered what Barth Marshall would say when she told him about losing the horse he had loaned her. Suppose the black were also shot from under Tim Cameron? Well, that would come out of Claire's wages, no doubt. Yet it was Tim himself that Claire worried about. Why didn't he leave Bear-track Basin? Only a hard-headed fool would try to battle, alone, against the formidable forces of the Crossbow.

Suddenly Claire stopped, turned and walked back toward the cabin on Meadow Creek. She *had* to know whether Tim came back this evening. Somebody had to stay there with Billie.

III

BILLIE was not at all eager for Claire's company at first. Yet he finally let her in the cabin, a neat, orderly cabin. Silently, rather grimly for an eight-year-old, Billie started peeling potatoes. The lad was going to get supper for Tim. Suddenly, as she watched those chubby, capable little hands at their task, Claire's eyes brimmed full of tears again. She had envisioned a small boy waiting, tight-lipped and silent, for a big brother who wouldn't return. Claire got up from her chair, walked hurriedly toward the door.

"What's wrong?" Billie asked.

"Well," she answered, not daring to face him, "aren't you just a little worried when Tim goes out man-hunting that—that he might run into serious danger?"

"He's allus come home so far," replied the lad confidently. "Tim's never scared. And he says if you ain't scared, nothin' can't hurt you."

If Claire couldn't accept this philosophy, at least she wouldn't alarm the lad by disagreeing with it.

Sunset slanted her crimson light across the range. Billie started a fire. The lilac haze of dusk was billowing across the hills when Claire, chafing under the suspense of waiting for Tim Cameron, finally heard the tinkle of a spur rowel outside the door. She leaped to her feet again, but Billie said:

"That's only old Willow. . . . Come on in, Willow."

Claire saw a gangling, mild-eyed man with black hair, framing himself in the doorway. His bluish-green eyes appraised Claire leisurely before he said:

"Where's Tim, Billie?"

"Out chasin' Jake Weir again, Willow," came the lad's reply. "I guess this'll be the last time Weir'll bother us any."

"Here's hopin'," said Willow Green in that cavernous voice of his. "Tim said somethin' about twistin' barb wire around Weir's unclean neck if he pestered around any more. Uh—did you ever interduce anybody, Billie?"

"Interduce?" the lad echoed blankly. "I don't know what you mean, Willow."

"I'm Claire Taylor, teacher over at the Crossbow school," said the russet-haired girl to the gangling man with the two guns swung low at his hips. "You're a neighbor of the Camerons?"

"Yep. Live just over the ridge to the west, at Two Springs."

Claire further explained what had happened this evening, and Willow Green answered, "So Weir put Tim afoot, then Tim put you afoot. Too bad about Tim's sorrel. It was a mighty good horse, but I expect the Marshalls', bein' fair and noble people, will make things right with Tim."

"So you hate the Marshalls, too?" Claire asked.

Before the gangling man could answer that question, hoofbeats were

sounding out there near Meadow Creek. Claire saw those long, talon-like hands of Willow Green drop to his guns—and Billie blew out the lamp which had been lighted.

"It's all right, Billie!" yelled a voice a voice that Claire wanted to hear.

Then Tim Cameron was riding up on the jaded black pony that Claire had borrowed from Barth Marshall.

"Well?" asked Claire. "What happened?"

"There's no word to send back to the Crossbow," Tim answered flatly. "They'll understand the message I send, though. If you're goin' to lose out on supper, I suppose you could eat here, Miss Taylor."

"No, thanks!" she snapped, assuming a manner which belied the great relief she felt. "Now that I don't have to walk, I'll go home."

"I'd keep this black horse if he was worth as much as my sorrel," said Tim calmly. "But Weir left a roan horse I'd rather have."

"Weir *left*—" she said, staring.

Willow Green laughed softly. Cameron remained silent. Nerves taut, Claire hastened toward the black horse, mounted and started to ride away. . . .

When the girl finally arrived back at the Crossbow, frail, tall Mrs. Harrington, wife of the range foreman, said: "I kept supper waitin' long as I could, Miss Taylor. Still, I could fix a bite for you."

"Never mind," said the weary girl. "I'm not hungry." She wasn't, either. Life had suddenly become a tangle of confusion. Disgusted with herself, Claire wondered why she should be so concerned about Billie Cameron's not going to school; about the odds against Tim Cameron. And Willow Green! There was one of the strangest men Claire had ever encountered. A strange confliction of gentleness and dynamite—that was Willow Green. But this gangling man with the musical laugh, and two, low-swung guns, was on Tim Cameron's side. Claire could see that plainly enough. Well, heaven knew, Tim needed some help if he were going to battle such odds as the Crossbow outfit!

Later that evening Claire talked with Barth Marshall. The pleasant young man made no reference to her tardiness in getting home tonight. He merely hinted that he was disappointed in losing out on her company. But when old Phil Marshall came along and saw his son talking with the teacher, it was another matter. Old Marshall scowled at Claire and snapped:

"If you're going to ride horses as hard as that black looks like he'd been ridden this evening, you'd better walk. Where did you go?"

"Why, over toward Meadow Creek," she replied.

"Why?" he countered bluntly.

"Oh, Dad!" cut in young Barth. "What's the difference?"

"Because I don't want any Crossbow folks going over there, that's the difference!" was the elder Marshall's irascible reply. "You know how the Crossbow gets blamed for everything that happens to Tim Cameron or Willow Green. Keep away from them, I say!" He walked on toward the big house looming on the rise.

To Barth the girl said, "How does it happen that Tim Cameron has so many haystacks over there, and the Crossbow has so few?"

"Oh, he has nester instincts. And the best wild hay land in the basin. Too, he hopes to build up another herd of cattle."

"Another herd?"

He nodded. "Rustlers got away with all the other cattle the Camerons had—several years ago. Not that anybody with sense would waste time stacking hay in this basin. There's range feed here, summer and winter. Of course, on account of this being an unusually dry summer, the feed's a bit short over in the hills to the south where we badland our cattle during the winter. But nothing to worry about—if you *are* worrying about Tim Cameron."

"Barth!" said the girl, flushing. "I

dislike meddling in other peoples' affairs, but it seems to me that—"

"Then don't meddle!" he said sharply and turned away.

Slowly, hurt a little, Claire went back into the Harrington home. To Mrs. Harrington, who was setting a batch of bread, the girl remarked: "Who is, or was, Jett Dalhorn, Mrs. Harrington?"

"Dalhorn!" exclaimed that frail, stringy-haired woman. "He was a murdering cattle thief that, with two gunslingin' pards, made Bear-track Basin into a hell for a while. And he was hired by the Southwestern Steer Company to scare the little ranchers outa this basin. So the Southwestern Company could grab all this range for the fattenin' and maturin' of the steers they trailed up north here."

"But what happened?" Claire asked. "The Marshalls—were *they* the Southwestern Company?"

"No!" said the woman emphatically. "Phil Marshall threw in with the little ranchers, beat the Southwestern Company and their hired gunmen off this range. Then what did the little ranchers, the nesters, do? They turned on the Marshalls, fought them. Yes, and two of the fools are still fightin'—meanin' that bull-headed Tim Cameron and his ex-outlaw friend, Willow Green! They should be horse-whipped, run outa this country. But old Marshall just tries to ignore 'em."

"Then Dalhorn, the man who killed Tim Cameron's father, wasn't working for Mr. Marshall?"

"Of course he wasn't! Me and my husband was here. We know what happened. Cameron and Green have no real quarrel with the Marshalls. They're just jealous of the Crossbow's size."

"Have you ever talked with Tim Cameron? Tried to make him understand?"

"Waste my breath on that hate-spittin' scum and his pal, Green? No. I ain't so impressed with his looks as some younger women might be! I see him for what he is, not for the abused martyr he pertends to be!"

Thus rebuked, and more confused than ever, Claire went to her room, a lonely, log-walled room furnished with homemade fixtures. Never had she felt quite so utterly isolated. Mrs. Harrington was disgusted with her; so were Phil Marshall, his son, and Tim and Billie Cameron. Claire suddenly decided she had better forget about the Camerons and tend to her teaching. But, as she dozed off to sleep that night, she kept seeing the face of little Billie Cameron, a manly, handsome little lad who, though eight years old, had never been to school. That bothered Claire.

Dawn was only beginning to break when Claire, hearing the creak of a pole gate twisting in its tenets, sat up in bed and looked out the window. She saw a rider, a tall, erect rider leading a horse away from those corrals down by the creek. He was traveling fast, and heading westward toward Meadow Creek.

Other people had heard the noise at the corral. Cowpunchers began emerging from the bunkhouse, and Claire could see them halting near the corral. Then old Marshall and his son were out there. Curiosity impelled Claire to hurry into her clothes and join the group. But what she saw when she did arrive there made her weak inside.

On the ground lay what had once been Jake Weir, the big man whose unpleasant face was still marked by the blows from Tim Cameron's fists. And around Weir's neck was twisted a short piece of barbed wire. That threat of Tim's echoed through Claire's whirling brain: "If he ever tries it again, I'll twist a barbed wire around his dirty neck."

Well, Claire knew, Weir had tried it again. And here he was! Shuddering, the girl turned away. As she did so she heard a puncher say:

"What about this, Mr. Marshall? Are you goin' to let Cameron do this to

one of your riders and not strike back?"

"He isn't my rider!" Phil Marshall clicked, his voice chillier than the September dawn.

"But what about Cameron takin' Weir's roan horse?" asked another.

Claire moved beyond hearing distance. She wished she hadn't left her room. Well, that's what one got for meddling! She had been curious and had seen a sight that would haunt her for days—and nights!

DURING the next month Claire didn't leave the Crossbow. Sometimes she walked with Barth Marshall who seemed more and more attracted to her beauty. Yet, there were times when the girl's hazel eyes looked off toward Meadow Creek; times when she wished little Billie Cameron could attend school. Tim Cameron had no right to raise little Billie the way he was rearing him —on hate and in ignorance.

October was a golden month of Indian Summer, a month when the Bear-track Basin range swam in the blue haze, and when the nights took on a zestful tang. The Crossbow beef round-up was over, and Barth went East with the huge shipment of steers. It was lonely for Claire, with Barth away.

The girl bought an old pony from Harrington, the range foreman, an old saddle and bridle, and began riding alone. At first she shunned Meadow Creek, but gradually she edged closer and closer to it. One day she met Billie Cameron riding a pinto pony across the hills. The boy seemed glad to see her.

Claire and Billie had quite a long talk. Before the lad left, he had promised to meet Claire tomorrow evening at the Cove, a rocky spot near the base of a low promontory; and Billie kept his word. He was there at the appointed place when Claire, carrying books and a pencil and tablet she had smuggled from the Crossbow school, rode forth to give Billie Cameron his first lesson.

It thrilled Claire, the way Billie drank in her instruction, the eagerness with which he took to study. She was surprised to find that he could identify all the letters that first day, and that he could read a few words.

"You're sure you haven't been to school, Billie?" she asked.

"Tim's learned me a few things," he said. "But he's just so doggoned tired of a night that he dozes off to sleep. And we don't like to keep a lamp lit no more'n we have to. Our place has been shot into so doggoned much."

"Not since Jake Weir died?" Claire asked.

"Well, once since then, yeah," replied the gray-eyed lad. "Just 'fore daylight this mornin', somebody shot into our place. The bullet grazed Tim. He's out on the trail now, him and Willow Green."

"More murder!" groaned the girl. "More useless killing!"

"Look!" whooped Billie, who was perched on a rock. "There's Tim now. I can tell that old roan horse of Jake Weir's. Tim's chasin' somebody!"

Billie was right. Down there on the open flat below the cove, a horse race was in progress. Hard on the trail of quarry which, it appeared, was heading for the Crossbow, spurred Tim Cameron. Claire caught the glint of sunlight reflected from his drawn gun. But there was no shooting yet. Perhaps Tim was saving his ammunition until he drew closer to his prey.

"Why don't he start shootin'?" cried Billie.

Then both Claire and Billie knew why Tim was holding his fire, why he was jockeying the other rider toward a certain rocky point. As the fleeing rider drew near that point, another figure appeared—the gangling figure of Willow Green. Too late the fleeing man saw the hopelessness of his position.

His horse slowed down, his hands, minus guns, lifted high in the air. And, even from that distance, Claire could hear his croakings for mercy.

Excited, Billie had already leaped astride his pinto pony and was on his way toward the scene of the capture. Claire didn't know why, but soon she was following Billie; was arriving near the rocky point in time to see Tim Cameron binding the prisoner's hands. That prisoner, a medium-built man with a crooked nose and a long scar on his jaw, was pale of face, trembling a little as he croaked:

"No barb wire, Cameron! No wire around my neck. Kill me if you want to but—"

"Willow and me are tryin' something else this time," Tim told him.

"What?" Claire demanded tensely. "Do you mean you've devised a still more brutal way of putting men to death?"

"Listen, Willow!" Tim's voice conveyed contempt. "One Crossbow hirelin' worryin' about the fate of her fellow worker!"

"This man *isn't* a Crossbow rider!" snapped the girl. "At least, I've never seen him around there!"

"Yeah, you're the same person that told me Jake Weir was off the Crossbow payroll, too. But I choked a different story outa that crook 'fore he passed on to the hell where he belonged," Tim replied harshly. "His carcass was delivered to the right place. But Lefty Hoag, here—well, he's goin' down to Sandbar—and jail."

"I ain't workin' for the Crossbar no more," the prisoner stated firmly. "If you're finally turnin' to the law, Cameron, you won't get nothin' outa' me!"

"Yes, we will, Lefty," said Willow Green in that cavernous voice of his. "You'll squawk all you know about Phil Marshall 'fore Tim and me's through with you. There'll be still another witness to your squawkin'. I'm referrin' to old Sam Preble, the trapper that hangs around up there in the mountains. He's at Tim's place now. Huh! You don't think Tim and me'd be fools enough to both leave home, without leavin' somebody there, somebody we could trust—to keep an eye on things."

"Are you telling the truth, Willow Green?" demanded Claire. "Are you going to turn this man over to the law? Act like human beings should act instead of—"

"Yes," he answered quietly, and with the hint of a smile. "But there'll be plenty killin' tonight if you tip Old Man Marshall off that we're holdin' one of his snipers, and if Nick tries rescuin' him. Just remember that, pretty girl."

"You're already tellin' her too much, Willow," said Tim Cameron, distrust in his eyes as he looked hard at Claire. "What's that old sayin'? Oh, yeah! 'Whose bread I eat, his song I sing'."

"That's a lie, Tim Cameron!" cried the girl, stung by his words, his tone. "I'm only a civilized person who believes that—"

"That the king can do no wrong, meanin' cattle king Marshall," he retorted coldly. "And crown prince Barth's goin' to inherit lots of money some day. He's already got all he wants to spend. No wonder he could slip old Gus Tanner down at Sandbar a hundred dollars cash to send the pretty girl out to the Crossbow, and keep the fat, freckled teacher down at Sandbar."

Claire caught her breath sharply. "More lies! I don't know why I ever bother speaking to you, Tim Cameron!"

"Neither do I," he drawled. "Seein' that Barth Marshall's so rich and mighty."

"That sounds like jealousy!" she flared. "That's the basis of your whole trouble with the Marshalls, anyhow! I'm glad you're finally going to court—if you are! It's high time the truth were aired. And when it is, you'll find that you've been barking up the wrong tree for a long time."

"Come on, Billie," said Tim. "We're goin' home now."

Willow Green, the prisoner and Jim started riding away, but Billie lingered long enough near Claire to say: "Don't be too mad at Tim, Miss Taylor. And don't call him a liar, 'cause—" the lad's voice rose and tears welled to his eyes, "my brother ain't no liar!" He reined his pinto pony sharply and followed his older brother.

"My brother ain't no liar!" Those words rang in Claire's ears as she rode homeward. Poor, loyal little Billie. No father or mother. Only a big brother to worship—a brother whose strong jaw seemed always tilted at battle angle, and who cinched barbed wire around the necks of dead men! Well, there was one satisfaction. At last the law, the final resort of civilized men, would settle this strife in Bear-track Basin.

Striking a lope, and having the satisfaction of knowing that this was her own horse she rode, Claire was soon riding up to the Crossbow corrals.

"Hello, beautiful one!"

"Barth!" she cried happily. "You're back from taking steers to market! Gee, but it's been lonesome around here without you!"

"Why, you say that as if you actually meant it, Claire!" He came forward briskly, eagerly, and reached up to swing the girl from her saddle. For an instant his strong arms clung to her. Then, smiling with keen blue eyes, he said:

"I brought a little trinket back with me, Claire girl. A little gift that I've set a store of faith in, and one that I hope you'll accept."

"What is it, Barth?"

"This." He took a tiny box from his pocket, opened it, and exposed the beautiful solitaire diamond ring cushioned there on deep blue velvet.

"Oh, Barth!" It wasn't exactly a cry of joy that escaped Claire's red lips. It was surprise, astonishment.

"Well?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation. "Like it?"

"It—it's beautiful," she said.

"And you'll—"

"But, Barth! It's such a shock. You've never told me how you felt."

"You've suspected, haven't you?"

"Well, I've always thought you liked me, Barth. At least, I've hoped so." Claire was floundering. She didn't know what to say. She didn't want to hurt this man, and yet. . . .

"Let's talk things over later," she hedged. "In the meantime, I wish you'd answer a question for me."

"Shoot!" he said.

"Well, the circumstances about my —my coming out here to the Crossbow. Hadn't you previously arranged for another teacher out here, and then—"

"Quite right," he answered. "Then I saw you standing on that depot platform. My heart stood still for a moment. Then it began to hammer until I was afraid you'd hear it all the way across the street."

"And you arranged with Mr. Gus Tanner to—"

"That I did," he admitted, laughing softly. "Old Gus would sell his soul for a hundred dollars cash. And it seemed such a simple way to have you close to me."

"You did bribe Gus Tanner!"

"You bet I did!" he answered. "And I'd do it again—if you were the stakes. Now scold me if you must, little teacher, but *do* make up your mind to accept this ring. See you after supper, eh?"

"After supper." She smiled up at him, a peculiar little smile. But she didn't see Barth Marshall's keen blue eyes. She saw the gray eyes of Tim Cameron, the man whom she had called a liar this evening. Well, he hadn't lied about Barth's bribing old Gus Tanner of the Sandbar school board. That was certain! And those tears in poor little Billie's eyes. . . .

Suddenly Claire's own hazel orbs were brimming as she walked toward the Harrington home—and supper. Claire didn't eat much. She was too

busy figuring out some way in which to postpone, and as diplomatically as possible, a decision which Barth Marshall was asking her to make regarding a certain beautiful and very expensive ring.

After supper Claire did manage to postpone that decision, and a definite answer to Barth. Arm in arm the couple were strolling along Bear Creek, were heading back toward the ranch buildings, when a rider came angling down a little rise, a small rider who, slumping in his saddle, appeared to be drunk.

"Hey, Shorty!" called Barth. "What's the idea of riding over from the Pocket Springs camp this time of night? Are you drunk?"

"Not—drunk," came the reply.

"Why, he's hurt!" Claire cried. "Look at the blood on his clothes and saddle!"

"Yeah, hurt—shot," mumbled the dazed puncher, still clinging instinctively to the saddle horn. "Should've been here, at the home ranch, long time ago."

"What happened?" Barth asked.

"Heard some shootin' when I neared the road leadin' to town," mumbled the wounded man. "Had a look-see. Found that old trapper, Sam Preble, dead. Shot to death. So was the man with him. Crooked-nosed feller. Stranger to me. He was tied to his saddle. Drug quite a ways 'fore he fell. Preble wasn't quite dead. I got off my horse, started talkin' to him. Then somebody shot from a clump of cedars. The bullet hit me in the back."

"Get him to a bed, Barth!" Claire cried. "He's badly shot!"

"Yeah, bad shot!" Shorty Milner gasped. "Long ride tonight—long ride!" His voice trailed off. He swayed dangerously in his saddle as Barth, moving quickly, leaped, broke the fall of the little man.

Shorty talked no more. Before husky Barth could carry him to the nearest cabin, he had died.

"Murder . . . guns . . . dead men!" Barth Marshall growled. "Sometimes I wish I could stay out there in the civilized world I've just come back from! Bear-track Basin! They should call it Murderers' Paradise!"

"It—it seems that way," choked Claire, miserably.

"Better go over to your room," Barth told her. "I'm saddling a horse, taking a couple of men and backtrailing Shorty. What did a harmless old gent like Sam Preble ever do that he should be murdered?"

Claire was strongly tempted to tell Barth that Preble had been sent to deliver a prisoner to town. But—had he? How could you believe anything you heard on this range? This mountain-girt land too remote for the law to patrol? And what did Tim Cameron and Willow Green know about this killing? Had these two, for reasons of their own, suddenly decided against turning the man they called Lefty Hoag over to the law? Well, Claire intended to find out about that!

V

CLAIRE didn't find out about that triple murder, although she tried in a subtle way to get some information from young Billie Cameron, whom she met regularly at the Cove. Soon, however, these meetings were interrupted by November storms which, cold rain at first, then skiffs of snow that clung like fragments of cotton to the north hillsides, came blustering across the Bear-track Basin range. Claire dreaded to see winter set in. It restricted her freedom.

December was cold, and with winds that cut like chilled knives. Claire and her pupils put on a Christmas program at the Crossbow schoolhouse, and there was a big Christmas tree with gifts for everyone. Yet, in the midst of these festivities, the girl kept thinking about little Billie; kept wondering if

he would have any Christmas at all.

Christmas day, along toward evening, Claire swathed herself in warm clothing and rode through snow almost knee-deep over to the cabin at Meadow Creek. There she found Billie and Tim and Willow Green, eating a lonely supper of salt pork and potatoes and canned tomatoes.

"Claire!" cried Billie excitedly, happily.

"Merry Christmas!" she said, forcing a bright smile when she wanted to cry. She had seen the pitifully ragged little cedar tree that Tim had set up in the corner, an undecorated tree under which lay a pair of crudely fashioned cowhide mittens for Billie, and an old jack-knife with the bone handle missing from one side—the latter a gift from Willow Green, Claire guessed.

"Merry Christmas, Tim," said the girl.

"Is it?" he answered in a voice charged with bitterness.

Ignoring his manner, Claire put down some packages. Then, without another word, she opened a box, began stringing colorful decorations on the little tree in the corner.

"Gosh!" gasped Billie, gray eyes wide with awe. Billie kept on gasping, and Willow Green chuckled in that deep laugh of his as he watched Billie's suppressed emotional reactions.

But the lad could no longer suppress himself when Claire hung Christmas stockings filled with candy and nuts and dates on the little tree. And then that pair of boots that had come from Sandbar, real little cowboy boots and just Billie's size! The lad was half-crying, half-laughing as he clutched those boots to his heart. Claire looked over at Tim. She thought she saw a mist in his own gray eyes, but he turned his head quickly.

"Yep," said Willow Green, "a real Santy Claus, Billie boy. And the prettiest one any kid ever seen walkin' into a cabin that—that *was* pretty lonesome just a little while ago."

For the next hour there was feasting, the wild joy of little Billie filling the cabin, the deep laughter of Willow Green—and, eventually, a smile on Tim Cameron's face. The first one Claire had ever seen there. A smile that turned him into a different looking man.

When, at last, Claire took leave, Tim walked outside with her and said, "I'm mighty grateful to you, Claire Taylor. I couldn't go to town and get Billie anything—even if I'd had the money to buy it." His voice wasn't harsh now. It was musically soft, a little husky.

"You know," she said, "you're much handsomer when you smile than when you're just six feet of wrath, Tim Cameron. I always thought that under that mask of yours—well, I even believe you might accept a little trinket I brought for you. One I was afraid to offer you at first." From her saddle pocket she took a neatly wrapped blue silk neckerchief.

Then, without waiting for him to open it, Claire rode away into the bitterly cold night. But, cold as it was, and despite the fact that Jim had no coat on, he was still standing there watching her when she looked back from the snow-clad ridge.

The night wasn't cold for Claire. A surge of warmth rushed through her. Nothing had ever made her quite so happy as this trip over to Meadow Creek, now frozen and lined with denuded willows. Billie's gay yells still rang in her ears; and up there in the bitter-bright stars she saw a softness that was like the shine of Jim Cameron's eyes when he smiled.

That was the last trip Claire made over to Meadow Creek for several weeks. January was glacially raw, and marked by leaden gray skies. In February there was much snow; more, Barth Marshall told Claire, than he had ever seen before in this basin. From a frosty window of the Crossbow schoolhouse,

the teacher could see muffled cowpunchers herding small bunches of storm-weakened cattle into the reserve pastures where grass was tall. Some of those cattle were so weak they had to be fed precious hay that was intended for saddle horses.

Harrington, the range foreman, was worried. And old Phil Marshall, during the few times Claire caught glimpses of him, was grim, taciturn. Day after day the punchers drove straggling, hump-backed cattle into the pastures; so many of them that the long grass, poking in tangled brown clumps from the snow, began to disappear. February dragged on into March. Still there was no let-up in this bitter winter.

"I don't know what we're going to do," Barth told Claire one evening. "Dad's like a caged lion. We've got to have feed or we'll lose at least a thousand head of cattle."

"You couldn't trail them out to feed somewhere?" she asked.

He shook his head dismally. "No. They're too weak to buck deep snow."

"What about all that hay that Tim Cameron's been putting up over there on Meadow Creek?" she asked.

"Yes! What about it?" he snapped. "I can see Cameron over there laughing, gloating over his hay like a miser gloating over gold!"

"But have you tried to buy any?"

"He'd shoot any Crossbow rider that got near enough to bargain," was Barth's bitter reply. "The more Crossbow carcasses, the better Tim Cameron will like it."

"I think you're wrong, Barth," she said. "I'll bet *I* can ride over there and buy hay from Tim. Oh, he might want a good price for it, but he has a heart. I found that out last Christmas."

"Gosh, Claire! If you could buy hay for us, save these miserable, starving brutes— Where are you going?"

Already tying a shawl over her auburn head, Claire answered, "I'm heading for Meadow Creek, Barth. How much will you and your father pay for hay?"

"Any price! And we'll do all the hauling."

An hour later, cheeks red with cold, Claire was at Tim's cabin. Both Billie and Tim seemed glad to see her, but when she mentioned the reason for this visit, Tim's jaw clamped tight, and those little fires kindled in his eyes.

"And the Marshall tribe hootin' at me for playin' nester—puttin' up hay!" he said. "They won't get a pound of my hay. And if they try stealin' it, there'll be corpses freezin' out there in the snow."

"Tim!" Tears were bright jewels in Claire's hazel eyes. "Think of those dumb, starving cattle. Is it their fault that they carry the Crossbow brand? And you need money desperately. Look at those clothes little Billie's wearing —worn out, patched, thread-bare, like your own!"

"We can't all wear fine clothes like Barth Marshall!" he growled savagely. "Barth's sent you beggin' over here, now that him and his thievin', murderin' old father's in a pinch. It ain't dumb brutes *they're* worryin' about. It's profits!"

"Just the same, the cattle get the suffering," she said. Desperately, she turned to little Billie and said, "*You'd* sell me some hay if you owned it, wouldn't you, Billie?"

Haunted by the pleading of her eyes, Billie looked down at the only decent thing he wore—a pair of cowboy boots. He seemed to be torn between gratitude to this girl and loyalty to his brother. Yet, he said:

"I guess I'd do most anything in the world for you, Claire. And I guess Tim would, too, if—if it wasn't for the Marshall tribe. I hate to think of animals goin' hungry. I know how it felt, just 'fore Tim was lucky enough to kill a deer the other day over in Cedar Breaks."

"Tim!" pleaded the girl. "Ask any

price you want for your hay, but please, for my sake—"

"All right!" he said. "I'll trade the Marshalls two hundred tons of hay for two hundred head of cows. That kinda stuns you, don't it? Well, that's how many cattle we lost once to the rustlers, rustlers paid by old Phil Marshall. So I'll still be *givin'* the hay, and for your sake. He can take it or leave it!"

High as that price was, Old Man Marshall accepted it. He had no choice. He called Tim Cameron a "damned thief." But he sent hay sleds over to Meadow Creek. And while two hundred tons of hay wasn't much for the Crossbow outfit, it meant a lot to saddle horses.

Then a surprising thing happened. The hardest winter the Marshalls had seen in Bear-track Basin broke sharply under chinook winds that melted snows and started tiny rivulets running in a thousand gulches. Instead of being grateful for this mercy of the elements, old Phil Marshall spat:

"We could've skimped through without that much hay." His bright blue eyes glared at Claire as if she were to blame for his parting with more cattle than had been necessary.

"Maybe some of those weak cattle would appreciate your not skimping them so much," the girl told him.

"Ugh!" he grunted fiercely. "You're glad enough to see Cameron skin me out of those cattle, I'll wager!"

That was the thanks Claire received from the elder Marshall. But Barth told her not to mind; that she had saved the day, and because of her influence with Tim Cameron. Young Barth added:

"I wish I had as much influence with you, Claire. I'm still holding onto that diamond ring, still praying that some day soon you'll accept it."

"Oh, Barth! I do like you a lot. Maybe later I'll—"

"Learn to love me?" he asked hopefully.

Claire made no reply to that. Her eyes had turned toward Meadow Creek.

VI

THE MAGIC of April transformed Bear-track Basin from a winter-locked land into a world of greening slopes and budding willows, and Claire found it difficult to stay within the log walls of the little schoolhouse. As soon as school was over in the afternoon, she saddled her horse and rode across hills where young calves scampered playfully through the resinous sage.

One day, rather late in returning home, Claire met three riders; not Crossbow punchers, but hard-faced men who rode black horses and who wore hats low over their faces. A little chill raced through the girl as she met, if only briefly, the glittering black eyes of the man in the lead, a slim man with a twisted mouth and with the upper half of his right ear missing.

Claire was to see those three men again before the night was over. Strolling, later, with Barth in the bright moonlight, and along the winding trail that followed Bear Creek, Barth said:

"Maybe this is our last stroll together, Claire. I've got to know now, tonight, if you're going to marry me. I can't be near you so much and without knowing where I stand." His voice took on edge. "You've played with me like a cat plays with a mouse. If you love me, say so. And take this ring I've got here. If it's Tim Cameron you love—" Abruptly Barth Marshall broke off his speech.

A figure had stepped from the shadow of a big cottonwood tree; a slim man who held a levelled forty-five in his steady hand.

"Sorry to interrupt your love makin', young feller," said the man with the upper half of his right ear missing, "but business first."

"You!" Barth said in a low, tense tone.

"Yeah, me. I tried arguin' with your old man, but he's as stingy as ever with his ill-gotten gain. So we're goin' for a long ride, you and me, Barth Marshall. Yeah, and a couple of my pards waitin' with the horses down the crick here."

"No!" Claire protested, suddenly filled with a terrible fear.

"Yes!" came the flat reply of the slim man with the gun levelled at Barth. "If you think Barth Marshall's worth savin', if you want to see him live instead of die, go to old Phil Marshall. Tell him his son'll be over at the Spider Crick cabin for the next twenty-four hours. Ten thousand dollars'll buy Barth back. But if that money ain't there within that time, there'll be no more Barth."

"Tell Dad he'd better pay up, Claire," was Barth's parting remark, as, with a gun at his back, he was marched away.

Petrified for an instant, the girl suddenly turned and raced back toward the Crossbow buildings. She wished that she and Barth hadn't walked so far. By the time she could notify old Phil of his son's abduction, Barth and his captors would be far away on fleet black horses. . . .

Gasping, Claire was finally at the door of the spacious Marshall home, and was pouring out her story to old Phil who stood there, grim, scowling.

"I'll go and rouse some of the other men!" said the girl.

"No!" Marshall clicked. "What do you want to do? Stir up a big gunfight, knowing Barth will be the first to die?"

"But all that money!" she said. "Can you raise that much cash—and that soon?"

"No!" he admitted brokenly, and the girl saw that Phil Marshall's stern mask was slipping; that he was just a trembling old man who, loving money as much as he did, loved his only son more.

"This spread's mortgaged to the hilt," he added. "Nobody knows that but me—and now, you. Oh, not those cattle I traded Cameron for hay. I wouldn't let that nester scum bait me into jail by gettin' me to trade off mortgaged cattle! But the rest of it."

"Who are those men that took Barth?" demanded the girl.

"They're—" He caught himself. "You go on to bed, girl. And keep your mouth shut about this affair. Understand? I'll handle it!"

"I—I understand!" she gulped, and quickly withdrew.

Claire didn't go to bed. With dread in her heart she sat in her room and watched the Marshall home. At last she saw old Phil Marshall leave that spacious house, go to the corral and ride away; not toward Sandbar, but toward the mountains. Where could he be going? And why? He had admitted not having ten thousand dollars. Would Barth die because his father didn't have that much cash. Very likely he would!

With that harrowing thought, Claire left her room, stole out into the night. Should she rouse the Crossbow punchers, tell them what she knew? No; that wouldn't do. If they went charging up to Spider Creek cabin, wherever that was, there would be a gun battle, no doubt. And Barth would be the first to die.

But, with Barth's life hanging in the balance, something had to be done! Finally, and not knowing just why, Claire saddled her horse and rode fast over to the cabin at Meadow Creek. Once she had persuaded Tim Cameron into saving starving cattle. Perhaps he could be persuaded, if only he knew how, to save the life of Barth Marshall. Not for Barth's sake, but for Claire.

If the girl expected to waken Tim, she was mistaken. Fully dressed, armed with a six-shooter and carrying a rifle in his hand, he came to the door.

"What's up?" he asked.

Frantically, tearfully, she blurted out her story.

"A gent with the top of his right ear missin', eh?" he said slowly. "Judgin' from your tears, you think a heap of Barth Marshall."

"I do!" she sobbed. "I suppose you're the last man in the world I should ask to save Barth, Tim, but—well, I'm mired down in terror!"

"Don't be," he said in a low voice. "I think maybe old Willow Green can do a good turn for you—and ourselves, too. My horse is all saddled and standin' in the barn. You stay here with Billie."

"Wait, Tim!" she cried. "You mustn't start any shooting up there at Spider Creek."

"Yes," he said. "There'll be shootin' up there."

"You *want* to see Barth killed!" she cried. "Oh, I was a fool for ever coming here!"

He didn't hear her. En route to the barn, and with his guns glinting in the moonlight, he moved fast. Soon he was riding toward Willow Green's little place over at Two Springs.

"Golly!" blurted Billie who had finally gotten into his clothes. "You sure started somethin' when you mentioned that ear-marked feller!"

"Who is he, Billie?"

"I don't know. But when I seen him and a couple of his pards ridin' around this range today, and when I told Tim about it—well, Tim's been on guard ever since. But I'm scared of that ear-marked feller and his pards. They're the toughest lookers I ever seen. And if Tim and Willow bumps into 'em—" Billie's voice broke.

"Suppose we saddle your pony and then follow Tim and Willow?" Claire suggested. "That way we could see what goes on."

"Yeah, let's!" whooped Billie. "This waitin' around is what gets under a man's hide!"

Never had Claire seen so beautiful an April night as was this one. In the balmy air was the smell of spring, and upon the hills was the witchery of silver shed by a full moon. But in the heart of the girl was an anguish she had never known before. Death seemed to lurk in every shadowed gulch.

"You know where the Spider Creek cabin is, Billie?" she asked.

"Sure! Right up on the mountain slope there. Golly! Tim and Willow are ridin' fast. Let's hurry up."

"Not too fast, Billie," she said.

Claire wondered if the ear-marked man and Barth were already at that cabin; if old Marshall, pleading poverty, had arrived and was begging for his son's life. But the ear-marked man said he had argued with old Phil before this evening and that the latter was "stingy as ever with his ill-gotten gain." That meant the man who had abducted Barth wouldn't believe the elder Marshall. In that case. . . .

And what about Tim and Willow, the two who, side by side, had long battled the Marshalls? Would they take this opportunity to settle their score, once and for all? The eagerness with which Tim had headed for Spider Creek weighed heavily on Claire.

"Who owns the Spider Creek cabin?" asked Claire of Billie.

"Why, old Sam Preble, the trapper, did own it."

"Oh! The man who was killed along with Lefty Hoag, the prisoner he was taking to town? Has Tim ever said who he thought killed them?"

"Huh!" said the lad. "Tim and Willow know! Know it was old Marshall—or Barth. The Marshalls didn't want the law to know what Hoag had to say."

"I don't believe that!" she replied. "I know Barth isn't a murderer. Come on! Let's do hurry a little!"

An hour later, perched on a mountainous knoll overlooking the Spider Creek cabin, Claire and Billie gazed down into that moonlit draw which held five saddled horses. Talk that had been quiet at first down there grew louder, so loud that Claire could catch

a few words now and then from her precarious perch.

At last five men emerged from that darkened cabin and four of them moved toward a cottonwood tree. Quite clearly now Claire could hear the flat voice of the ear-marked man saying:

"Do you shell out ten thousand cash, Phil? Or do we swing your son, and then you—on this cottonwood limb?"

"I can't raise ten thousand!" yelled the older man.

"All that spread—and can't raise a measly ten thousand!" bawled one of the other men. "Well, let's string 'em up, and then go back to the basin and take a herd of Crossbow cattle. There's nothin' else we can do!"

"No!" croaked old Phil Marshall.

"Swing the old wolf's cub to that cottonwood!"

Frozen with fear, Claire was on the verge of crying out when, from a clump of cedars not far from the cabin, a voice yelled:

"Take lead, you——" Oaths spewed up from that draw.

"That's old Willow talkin'!" hissed Billie, eyes bugging out. "Him and Tim must've slipped down there and—"

The lad didn't finish his words. Guns were spitting their bright-tongued fire. The roar of shots fairly jarred the rock-ribbed draw. In that hideous explosion of hate, Claire could glimpse in the bright moonlight the gangling form of Willow Green who was wielding two guns—and Tim beside him.

The girl's heart leaped to her mouth as first one man, then another pitched forward to sprawl on the ground already stained with red. Claire had seen gunfire before, but never guns that blasted their leaden hail with the fierce rapidity of these blazing weapons.

"Billie!" screamed the girl as the lad, overcome with curiosity, half-fell down the steep slope of the knoll to reach the scene below. As Billie went, he kept yelling encouragement to his big brother. But Tim Cameron could hear nothing now save the rain of lead, could see nothing save those red, spiteful gunpowder flames darting out, seeking his life.

A bullet raked a crimson furrow in his left forearm. Another ripped leather loops from his gunbelt. Both had come from the gun of the ear-marked man who, trying desperately to use Barth Marshall as a shield, tried to get in a third shot. But he exposed himself to Tim a bit too much this time. A bullet from the latter's gun ripped into its target. The ear-marked man, torn through the ribs, spun around and dropped to his knees; tried again to bring up his gun.

Tim's next shot caught him through the lungs. Then, turning to see Willow pouring lead into another man crawling toward his dropped forty-five, Tim didn't see old Marshall, who had taken no part in the furious gun battle, reach for a small revolver down in his boot and bring it up.

"No!"

It was Claire herself who, only a few feet behind Marshall, leaped at him, seized his gun arm and jerked it down.

"You!" bellowed the old man. "Always butting into—"

He fought frantically for an instant to throw the girl away from him. Still she clung to that arm until Tim could get there and wrench the gun away from the owner of the Crossbow.

"So that's the way you thank me and Willow for savin' you and your damned cub!" Tim rasped, collaring the older man and jerking him about. "By tryin' to put a bullet through me! Yeah, and you would've if this girl—"

"Shut up, you!" bawled Willow Green who had stooped over the form of the ear-marked man. "I want to hear the rest of what Jett Dalhorn's sayin'!"

"Jett Dalhorn!" Claire cried, and raced in that direction.

With gasping breath the hired killer spat out his hate against old Marshall.

"Sure I tried blackmailin' him out of another ten thousand," said the dy-

ing man. "He could spare it. He spared that much when, unknown to anybody else, he was the Southwestern Steer Company, the layout that first grabbed Bear-track Basin—and killed ranchers, including old Tom Cameron. Yeah, and run off cattle—"

"Shut up, you double-crosser!" bawled Old Man Marshall, wild with rage.

"Let Jett Dalhorn tell the truth for once in his life—and 'fore he dies!" growled Tim, still clutching Marshall's gun arm.

Dalhorn, believing that he had been thus trapped by his former employer, did talk; told a story that revealed Phil Marshall's treacherous past, a past so treacherous that even Barth, his own son, didn't suspect it.

When Dalhorn, killed by the son of the man he had murdered for pay, had lapsed into eternal silence, Tim tightened his grip on Phil Marshall's arm and said:

"You killed Lefty Hoag and Sam Preble, didn't you, Marshall?"

"Yes, he did," Barth answered. "I did some trailing that night. I accused Dad of what he'd done. But he had a good story, a good lie that would fool his trusting son. He made me believe that poor old Preble *needed* killing. Later, I made him admit that Jake Weir, the man you killed, Tim, was still on the Crossbow payroll."

Looking hard at his father, Barth added, "I hereby renounce all relationship to my father—a man selfish enough to come up here and plead for my life, but tricky and ungrateful enough to try murdering the man who saved me."

"Barth!" sobbed Claire, and fumbled blindly at the knots of the rope binding the young man's wrists.

"Well," said Tim Cameron. "I was wrong about you, Barth. I tried savin' your neck because I figgered Claire Taylor wanted it saved. Too, it gave me a crack at Jett Dalhorn. Now I know why your dad sent you East to school. So he could pull his dirty tricks without your knowin' it."

"Apparently Claire asked a mighty big favor of you tonight, Tim," said Barth Marshall, his face pale and tense in the moonlight. "For me to ask another would be too much, I guess."

"Name it," said Tim, his own mouth tight.

"Let Phil Marshall get headstart enough to ride out of this country. I know he should be hanged. But, after all, he did try to save my skin tonight. And he is my father. And if I can save his—"

"He can, can't he, Willow?" said Tim.

"Yeah," came the answer. "After all, Tim, Dalhorn's the killer that actually done away with your father—and my brother. There'll be some satisfaction in knowin' we put his lamp out."

Soon old Phil Marshall, head bowed, was riding away from the son who had disowned him, and from the range he had stolen at the price of life.

"Don't take it too hard, Barth," said Tim. "And if the Crossbow's goin' to bust up with a crash, I'll stake you—and Claire—to a hundred head of them cows."

"Good gosh, Claire!" exclaimed Barth huskily. "No wonder you fell in love with Tim Cameron. He's got a heart that's truer than his gun shoots. Oh, wait! Here's a ring, Tim! Take it! Put it on the finger of a girl who loves you ten times more than she could ever love me."

"But, Barth," the girl protested. "I hate to—"

"The hate's all over," he interrupted, smiling. "It's love time in Bear-track Basin. Good gosh, girl! Don't you think I should be grateful enough that Tim's saved my life, he and old Willow?"

"But Claire don't love me!" Tim gulped.

"Liar!" she said, dabbing tears from her eyes.

"Aw, kiss her, Tim!" shouted Billie. "Tell her about how you keep writ-

in' her name, over and over, with a little stick in the dust. How you keep lookin' at the neckerchief she give you —after you think I'm asleep at night. Why, doggone you, I even seen you *kiss* that neckerchief night 'fore last when you thought I didn't see you!"

More flustered than he had been at the height of a gun battle, Tim finally grabbed Claire in his arms. They were still standing there when Barth and Billie and Willow sauntered down toward Spider Creek. The sage-tinctured breeze was wafting away all traces of gunpowder.

"Happy—after all these bitter years, Tim?" asked the girl softly.

"More than I can ever say," he answered, low voice unsteady with emotion. "I'm still too dazed to think such a sweet, such a beautiful girl as you could love me. And after the things I've said to you, darlin'. Forgive me?"

"One doesn't remember harsh words," she replied, "but I'll always remember you tonight, Tim. Remember you and old Willow ringing out, with your guns, the curfew on strife and deception. Remember you risking your life, rather than shoot down the man that Jett Dalhorn was using as a shield. And because you thought I loved Barth Marshall."

Her arms tightened around the neck of this cowboy who had so vigilantly guarded the heritage of trouble left him, and who had won the reward of love.

"Little Billie's beside himself with joy, Claire," said Tim. "He's *almost* as happy as I am. Not that anybody in the whole world could be that happy!"

"Nobody—except me," she answered softly.

City Slicker

A gripping novelette of a cowboy's strange sacrifice

By MARIE de NERVAUD

Case Closed

A powerful story of a man and a girl who dared face the past

By HERBERT A. WOODBURY

In the Second November Issue

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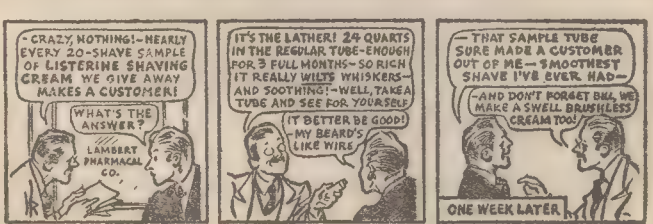
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Lost in a blinding snow-storm and wandering for days, courageous little Alice fell headlong into the arms of a strange and bearded man. She didn't know that beneath those whiskers was a stern jaw, or that his hands knew the feel of sixguns.

By O. A. Robertson

Belated Blizzard

FOR MANY days the magic of sun and soft April showers had been tinting the harsh grays and browns of the desert with a kinder, greener hue. Now, however, a low, white wall, advancing swiftly from the northwest, presaged a blizzard. The voice of spring had called, but winter still hurled back an occasional harsh echo of defiance.

Dave Harrup touched his mount with the spurs and loped up to the top of a small knoll, where he stopped for a moment to take his bearings. He had changed horses at the home ranch that morning, and the animal he now bestrode had no knowledge of the location of his camp, and, once enveloped in that advancing wall of snow, all landmarks would be instantly blotted out.

Dave was not particularly concerned. Through more than half of his twenty-five years his occupation had called for him to take weather as it came. But it would be tough on weak old cows and

the little, new-born calves that had been left in his charge. The cold blast driven ahead of the approaching storm was beginning to reach him.

Automatically Dave turned his deep collar up about his ears and buttoned his coat a little tighter. The storm itself might reach him in five minutes, or perhaps not for fifteen. At any rate it would be upon him long before he could reach camp. Already it surrounded him on three sides in a wide half circle.

"Hey!" he said, and checked his mount. Far out, and beyond an opening in two distant sand dunes he had caught sight of a close-huddled band of cattle. "What," he wondered aloud, "could be the cause of that?"

Instinct, born of years of experience, told him that the cattle were being, or had been driven. In this country, with hundreds of thousands of acres to graze upon, no such number of cattle would be bunched together of their own accord. But from where, and why, had they come? There were no other cattle in the country that he knew of, and he was certainly supposed to know the general movements of all the cattle on this section of the desert. He swore in irritation at being compelled to detour from a direct route to camp, but without hesitation turned and trotted toward them.

Immediately he lost sight of the cattle, and not until he emerged from between the two distant dunes did he catch sight of them again. Then they were close at hand. He estimated the number at between a hundred and fifty and two hundred head.

One glance as he rode around them was sufficient to show that they had been recently driven, and driven hard. There was no one here now, but whoever had bunched them had not been gone long. Fresh horse tracks showed that several riders had ridden around them, or one rider had circled them several times. Then the hurtling wall of snow was upon him. And with it materialized the faint outline of a rider. Dave ducked his head into the suddenly driving blizzard, and rode to meet the rider.

The horses came head to head, and as the other halted, Dave's animal instantly swung its hindquarters into the wind. Dave opened his mouth to speak, but the gale drove the words back into his throat, and it was a moment before he could get them out.

The strange rider had his coat collar turned up about his face until only his eyes and nose were visible, and was already completely encrusted in a blanket of snow. In that brief instant Dave observed that the horse showed signs of utter exhaustion, and that the rider was only a kid. His shoulders were hunched against the cold, and his rather short legs were stretched to the utmost in order for him to even tiptoe into the overlong stirrups.

"Hi, buddy, ain't you lost?" Dave yelled out of the corner of his mouth as he sought to shield a side of his face by burrowing it into his collar.

"I—I guess so," the youth screamed, rather than yelled back. "I am, or my outfit is. They haven't caught up with me."

"Who is your outfit?" Dave yelled, and felt the words whipped out of his mouth like the tail of a kite.

"My brother and another man. Have you seen anything of them?"

With his chin buried in the collar of his coat, Dave waggled his head in the negative.

"When did you see 'em last?" he asked when he could again get his breath.

"Yesterday."

"What?"

"Yesterday morning. They were to bring the camp and overtake me."

Dave gasped—and felt that he had swallowed a whole section of desert blizzard. He coughed and spluttered before he again caught his breath.

"You mean you've been out ever since then?" he demanded incredulously. "Ain't you had anything to eat?"

"No." The rider leaned close as though to make his words distinguish-

able, and suddenly toppled head first to the ground.

Dave's horse dropped its belly to the ground and leaped away with a terrific snort, but, finding its progress immediately checked again, stood still.

The youthful rider lay in a crumpled heap. Dave dismounted, but his horse refused to be led back to the terrifying object on the ground, and he was obliged to remount and circle around till he could come up from beyond the other animal to avoid being left afoot. He looped his reins over the other saddle before lifting the inert figure. The boy remained limp in his arms.

Dave wasted no time in any attempt at revival. Whether the boy had merely fainted from utter exhaustion, or had broken his neck in his headlong pitch to the ground, he did not know, but he could not stay here in this raging blizzard to find out. He shouldered the inert form and, carrying it around the horses, boosted it across his saddle. Then he mounted behind, and, leading the other horse, headed for camp.

Fortunately he had the wind behind him, and his horse was an exceptionally good one. Though packing a double load and all but dragging the other weary horse, the powerful animal maintained a long unvarying lope. Even so, the man's every shuddering muscle was contracted in agony against the biting cold long before he reached shelter.

AVE reached camp just before it became completely dark. A few minutes later and he would have passed by without seeing it, and perhaps become hopelessly lost himself. Taking his helpless burden in his arms, he staggered numbly inside and dropped it on the bed. The tent bucked and billowed under the force of the gale, but it was well staked.

Even inside it was gusty enough to make lighting the lamp difficult, and the horses had to be tended before they sought shelter and became lost. As it was, he jerked the blankets over the boy, and caught the animals just as they were starting away.

In the lee of the little stockaded corral where he kept his supply of grain, he found his other three horses. They were humped and shivering against the icy blasts while waiting for their customary feed of oats. Activity restored Dave's general circulation, but, by the time he got the animals fed and blanketed, his hands were so numb that he could hardly buckle the straps.

There was no extra blanket, so he blanketed the stranger's weary animal and let one of his own go without. Where the horses would be in the morning he did not know. If they once got to drifting with the storm, he would be left afoot and in a bad way, but it was too cold to keep them tied up. He could only hope that they would shelter themselves behind some sand dune as best they could and wait the blizzard out.

Returning to camp, he succeeded after several failures in fastening the tent's flap. It seemed to Dave that the whole tent was on the verge of blowing away entirely, and already snow had sifted through holes in the side, no bigger than a dime, forming little ridges clear across the floor. The stranger still lay a shapeless heap under the blankets, but Dave decided to get a fire going in the little sheet-iron stove before disturbing him.

Almost immediately the stove glowed red on one side. And then there was a spasmodic heave under the blanekts.

"Well, younker, we're in and got a fire goin' at last," Dave called cheerfully. "What'll you have for supper? Beef steaks or ice cream? We can fix 'em both at the same time. One on one side of the stove, and the other on the other." He stopped suddenly and gasped as though his breath had been suddenly wafted away on the wings of the wind.

The stranger had sat up. Wide dark eyes stared at him from a white, startled face framed in a tangle of curls that reached to the shoulders.

"What the hell? You—you ain't a

boy," Dave stammered with a wavering intake of breath.

The girl shook the curls back from her face and stared even more intently than ever as she got to her knees. "Who—who are you?"

"I'm Dave Harrup. No earthly account, but entirely harmless."

The girl got to her feet and, going to the entrance, peered out, but jerked her head back as the icy blast struck her face. She looked more bewildered than ever as she turned back and faced the man.

"How long has it been storming like this?" she asked.

"Nearly an hour, I reckon," Dave said. "When she comes up out here, she comes sudden."

"How long will it last?"

"I don't know. It may blow itself out—" He had started to say in a day or two, but reflected that even in that optimistic prediction there would be little comfort for the girl. "You must be pretty well starved. You'd better sit down, while I fix something to eat."

The girl reached unsteadily for an upturned egg crate and seated herself upon it. It was plain that she was finding herself physically incapable of further sustained effort.

"Where's my horse?" she asked.

"He was out back of the corral the last I saw of him," Dave told her. "But you can't ride him any farther. If you've got to leave here tonight you'll have to take one of mine—if we can get hold of 'em."

He knew it would be impossible while the storm lasted, and that it would be suicide for the girl to venture out. He had no intention of permitting it, but deemed it best to humor her as long as possible. However, she relinquished the subject.

"What are you doing here?" The question was asked with a curiosity that was almost childlike.

"I've been here all winter," Dave seized quickly on the opportunity to make conversation of a casual sort, and thus help the girl adjust herself to the strange surroundings. "The outfit winters several thousand head of cattle out here. We trailed everything out of here a week or two ago, except some weak cows, and cows with right young calves. I'm stickin' here to look after 'em until they've all had calves and the calves are old enough to travel. I'll probably be here for two or three weeks longer."

"Oh," the girl said, and for a moment seemed to be in deep thought. "I can't very well stay here, can I?"

"You're plumb welcome to stay," Dave said cordially. "You can wrap yourself in the blankets and get what sleep you can. I'll have to sit up and keep the fire going anyway," he lied gallantly. "I'd freeze to death if I didn't."

"You're an awfully kind man."

"Think nothing of it," Dave said relieved at the indication that he was going to be spared an argument. "What's your name?"

"Alice McCormick. Is this Indian Springs?"

"No, Indian Springs are about twenty miles west of here. I have to ride over there every day or two, though. This is Buffalo Springs here."

"That's where we were going," the girl said. "Buffalo Springs. Mr. Rowland said that the cattle had all pulled out of here, and that there'd be plenty of water in these springs for our little bunch all summer. Will we be trespassing?"

"Not on me." Dave knew that any extra cattle summering here would be resented by the outfits that used this section for a winter range, but that would have to be taken up with Mr. Rowland, or whoever it was that owned the cattle. "Where's this Mr. Rowland now?"

"I don't know. We camped on what they call Devil Creek." Dave knew this was some fifty miles to the south. "That was night before last. Mr. Rowland was to bring the camping outfit while Sandy—that's my brother—and I came on with the cattle. But he didn't overtake us. When it got dark, Sandy went back to find him. I stayed with the cattle all

night. Sandy didn't come back. I couldn't hold the cattle, so I just kept them coming the way we'd been directed. I thought maybe I'd got off the trail and that they'd gone by me. Now I don't know what to think. Could anything have happened to them?"

Dave saw that she was trying hard to conceal the anxiety she felt.

"A lot of things could have happened, but likely nothing very serious. Their wagon could have broken down, or they could have lost some horses, or they might have got headed for Indian instead of Buffalo Springs. In any case they'll be holed up until this blizzard's over. You got through, and I'll say that's something. If it had been me, I'd have left them cows and been hunting breakfast when it got light this morning."

The girl shook her head. "I couldn't do that. They're all we've got. Buffalo Springs is where he told us to go, and Mr. Rowland knows the country, so they didn't go to Indian Springs. I don't know why Sandy hasn't overtaken me."

"Neither do I, but I only hope he ain't caught out in this blizzard," Dave thought, but he deemed it best not to make any mention of that to the already worried girl. At that, he was more than amazed at the grit and courage she had already displayed. "Who," he asked, "is Rowland?" A subconscious dislike of the man who as yet was only a name began to form in his mind.

"We bought the cattle from him," Alice said. "But he holds a mortgage on them. That's why he's helping us to get located. We—we haven't had very much experience in running cattle on the open range."

Dave had guessed that, but he let it pass without comment.

"Do you think they'll do all right here?" the girl asked. "They're mostly young steers and dry cows."

"A small bunch like that should do fine here for a couple of months. After that I'm afraid it won't be so good. When the feed starts to dry up it dries fast. By the first of May all the springs but the two big ones are usually dried up. After this storm they'll likely hold up longer. But you should try to get a grazing permit on some good summer range. They might live here all summer, but they'll be in a lot better shape in June than they will be in August."

The girl nodded, but she was too hungry to divide her interest in the frying beef steaks and the golden-brown biscuits which Dave presently took from the oven. Outside, the gale shrieked and howled its fury, but inside it was getting pleasantly warm. Sifting snow still formed little ridges across the floor. These soon melted, forming unpleasant little puddles.

Squatting on low boxes, with an upturned crate serving as a table, they ate their supper. The girl, Dave thought, ate like a dainty, but greedy little animal. But utter exhaustion was as great as her hunger. She was already drifting into slumber before the last forkful of food passed her lips.

"You'd better pull your boots off and lie down," Dave told her, as he placed the dishes in a pan. When he glanced at her again she was seated on the bed with one boot off and sound asleep. She roused slightly as Dave removed the other boot, but was again lost in slumber when he had pulled the blankets over her and tucked them in around her feet.

ALL THROUGH the night the storm raged on, but fortunately Dave had put in a good supply of fuel against just such an emergency. Alternately he dozed and stoked the fire, but the girl never moved from her original position until Dave roused her some time after daylight.

"Well, Alice, it looks like we'd rode it through," he awakened her with a gentle shake. "The storm seems to be letting up. It's still snowing, but the wind's gone down considerable. I'm going out now and see if I can find some horses. Don't let the fire go out and,

when I get back, we'll have some breakfast."

The girl looked bewildered, and then smiled. Seen in daylight after a refreshing sleep, she looked decidedly prettier than she had the evening before, and older. Dave had guessed her age to be about sixteen. Now he surmised it was between eighteen and twenty.

She did not speak immediately, but when she brushed the tangled hair back from her face and sat up, Dave assured himself that she was in no danger of going back to sleep, and went out into the snow.

Visibility was still not good, and the horses were not at the corral. A foot of snow hampered his progress, but an hour later he came upon the horses, still too chilled and miserable to move of their own volition from the wash where they had found shelter. He was relieved to find that his own new horse and the girl's were still with the others.

Breakfast was cooked and waiting for him when he got back and had tended the animals.

"I'm not a good cook," Alice ventured apologetically, as she held the tent flap aside for him to enter. Her statement was not belied by the sad and soggy biscuits, and the steaks cut wedge-shaped, and cooked to a crisp on the thin end, while the blood all but oozed from the center of the other.

"Better to find that out now than later," Dave bantered. "Anyway you're a dandy little housekeeper," he added, as he observed that the usually tumbled blankets had been nicely straightened and that the muddy puddles had been thoroughly scrubbed from the canvas floor.

While they ate, Dave did what he could to relieve the girl's anxiety. "After all," he assured her, "it was something besides the blizzard that delayed your outfit. In all probability, a broken-down wagon, or the horses got away."

He admitted to himself that it was a lame excuse. If her brother was any kind of a man at all, Dave thought, he would have come on and overtaken his sister, even if he had had to do it on foot. Against that, however, was that the duration of the delay had been underestimated, and that the brother might have constantly and hourly expected to soon be on his way. Strange things do happen, and the best laid plans often go wrong. At any rate the brother would certainly not be long delayed, now.

"I think you'd better stay in," he told the girl, "and be here in case your brother comes by. Your horse is all in anyway, and you need the rest. I'm going out and see how the cows are doing and I might miss him. If he don't show up by noon or soon after, you'll have to take one of my horses and head for town. Your brother can find you there when he comes. You'd only miss 'em if you went looking for them."

"Thank you, I think that is the best plan," Alice said, "but if you don't mind, I'll wait until noon, anyway."

"You'll have plenty of time. If you get up and ride you can make it to Deseret in three hours, and I'll take up your stirrups a notch before you start," Dave told her, and went out.

A chill wind continued to blow, but an hour later the sun came out and glared coldly down upon an unbroken expanse of white that extended as far as the eye could reach. Dave's own cattle, those which he encountered, had suffered terribly. Here and there were little mounds of white, marking the spot where some new-born calf had perished. But for the most part the cattle had sought the nearest shelter and stayed there until the blizzard had blown itself out.

The girl's cattle, however, were on their way back, in little broken knots and strings that extended for several miles back along the trail. The snow had blown into their hides until each animal was literally encrusted in a blanket of white, but they were all big, stout stuff and there appeared to have been no casualties. Under the circumstances there was nothing to do but head off the retreat, and let his own stuff weather through as best they could.

Though he kept constantly scanning the horizon, Dave had reached the head of the column and was just turning it back when he caught sight of approaching riders. They were three in number and they were riding fast.

A cloud of steam rising from their blowing, sweating mounts was visible while they were still several hundred yards away. As the riders came close, they broke their single file formation, and came on wide apart and abreast, their horses' hoofs billowing up a concealing cloud of powdery snow.

Dave sought to pick out the girl's brother, and then suddenly stiffened. None of these men was young, and their bearing was not friendly. They stopped when the man in the center was ten feet distant, and each of the others were a rod from Dave's flank.

"What," the man in the center demanded without ceremony, "are you doin' with my cattle?"

AVE HARRUP'S memory was a long one. Despite certain changes he recognized the man in front of him as one Hank Patterson, who had been run out of the country five years before for being too free with a running iron. He couldn't tell whether the other man recognized him or not. Probably not, for Dave had let his beard grow all winter, and it was a long, black, silky one that reached half way down his breast. It was the beard, giving him an appearance of far greater age than he was, which had, perhaps, caused the girl to trust him so implicitly.

At any rate the man's inquiry made him wish that he had got his gun out from under the folds of his mackinaw coat. He saw now that all three men had their guns in their hands. If he started anything he wouldn't have a chance.

Cattle rustlers were seldom murderers, but these men looked different. He placed both hands on the fork of his saddle and leaned ahead.

"I might ask what your cattle are doin' on my range?" he retorted.

"Huh? Mean to say you just found these cattle roamin' around by themselves? Nobody with 'em?"

Dave had his wits about him. "That's about it," he drawled. He saw the men look at each other covertly, and with a satisfaction they tried in vain to conceal.

"If that's the case, and you're tellin' the truth, you've got a camp around here," Patterson said. "Take us to it."

"We'd better git his gun," one of the other men said.

"Just a minute," Dave said. "Is your name Rowland?"

He was a little surprised when Patterson answered, "Yes, I am. These are my cows, and they were rustled."

"Well, well, I'd never have taken that girl for a rustler," Dave murmured. "Just goes to show."

He was eying the men intently. His mention of the girl had taken a decided edge off their recent satisfaction.

"You mean that that girl survived the blizzard?" Patterson queried. "Where is she now?"

"As a matter of fact she left for Deseret maybe half an hour ago."

"Hub, you and Dick line out for that town and see if you can overtake her," Patterson ordered. "I'm takin' this bird back to his camp to see if he's lyin'. Where is it?"

"Over that way," Dave indicated vaguely.

Before they separated, the man called Hub rode close to Dave, lifted the skirt of his coat and removed his sixgun. Then two of them spurred away in the direction of the nearest town.

"Git goin', mister," ordered the man who called himself Rowland. "Head straight for that camp, and don't make no awkward move or I'll plug you right in the back."

Dave started. He was puzzled, but he was gradually getting some of the strands straight; not all of them, but a few. These men had been disappointed and worried when they'd heard that

Alice McCormick had survived. It meant that her life would be in danger when Patterson found her at the camp, but he could do nothing about that until he got there. He had succeeded in separating the men temporarily, and that was something. Anyway, the girl's life was in no more danger than his own.

This man calling himself Rowland, whom the girl trusted, was Hank Patterson, a rustler. That he knew. He wondered what had become of the girl's brother.

He detoured enough from the direct route to camp to make sure that the other two men would be well out of sight and hearing. Because the camp was as secluded as possible, they were right onto it before they could see it. Dave tensed himself for action.

They were twenty feet from the tent when the flap was thrown back and the girl appeared. "Mr. Rowland!" she cried joyfully.

Dave had his eye on the man. He saw the fellow's gun start to come up. Dave hooked his horse in the right shoulder with the spur, and swung it violently to the left, straight across the path of Patterson's horse. Patterson's bullet tugged at the heavy collar of Dave's coat, as the puncher lifted himself in the saddle and leaped.

Patterson was tough. Fully as tough as he had given himself credit for being, but his mistake was in trying to use his gun at a moving target when his horse was half down. A second shot went wild, and then Dave had landed behind the man's saddle, with both arms encircling the man's body and arms. The horse staggered to its feet and started to buck.

Patterson might have been a better fighter under certain circumstances, but Dave was a better rider. For a few seconds Dave let the man churn wildly in and out of the saddle, then he let go and plunged to the ground with Patterson underneath him. An instant later he had wrenched the fellow's gun hand up between his shoulders in a hammerlock, and forced him to let go of the gun.

"Stay still, or I'll blow the top of your head clear off, Patterson," Dave rasped, and pulled the man's coat back from his shoulders until his arms were effectually hobbled.

"Bring me that pigging string yonder," he called to the girl.

"But—but that's Mr. Rowland!" she protested.

"I know it, but he's Hank Patterson, too, and a murdering cow thief. Hurry up."

Acting like one mesmerized, the girl brought the pigging string, and in short order Dave had his man safely trussed up, and rolled inside the tent. Patterson had not lost his powers of vituperation, but Dave silenced him with a well placed kick.

"THERE'S two other fellows with him," Dave told the girl. "They may have heard the shots. Let me know if you see 'em coming. Now, Patterson, what have you done with this girl's brother?"

"You're crazy," the man said. "This has all been a mistake. Alice, Sandy is back at camp. I got two men and came on to hunt for you. Sandy got his feet frosted. We found this man with the cattle and thought he'd stolen 'em."

"Then everything is all right," Alice said.

"Except this little attempt that he just made to murder us," Dave said stolidly. "He's going to stay tied up till we find out for sure your brother is all right, and I git the straight about these cattle."

"They're coming, those others," the girl informed in an agonized, doubtful voice.

"Stay inside, Alice," Dave ordered. "You keep still, Patterson, or you'll draw a slug in the guts."

Hub and Dick were fifty feet from the tent when Dave leaped out, and made a swift jump to one side of the tent. If

bullets were going to fly he wanted to draw them away from the tent. And bullets did fly. Without pausing to ask questions the men went into action.

Dave had one great advantage. He had shucked his heavy coat and was in his short sleeves. The two outlaws were heavily bundled up in their big sheepskin coats. A bullet sliced along the fleshy part of the puncher's leg, but he didn't go down. A slug from his gun struck the man called Hub full in the chest. The gun fell from his hand. He coughed and faded from the saddle.

Dave kept shooting at the figure on the weaving horse, and he was being shot at. They kept the air alive with gun thunder for perhaps three seconds, then the fellow on the horse let his gun drop. He grabbed his face with both hands for an instant, took them away, and gazed at them with eyes extended with horror. The palms of both hands were covered with blood. Sickened, the man reeled in his saddle and fell. Dave was over him before he could move.

The outlaw's scare was worse than his hurt. Dave's bullet had slashed across his cheek just under his eye. Half an inch inside and it would have blown his brains out.

"Talk fast, you skunk," Dave ordered. "What became of this girl's brother?"

The outlaw choked and stammered before he could answer. He was holding his cheek with his hand, and the blood was seeping through between his fingers. He knew that his only chance to get help was to talk.

"He—he's dead," he whispered. "We thought him and his sister were ahead with the cattle, and we were talkin' over our plans to steal the cattle back when he stepped out from behind the wagon and accused Patterson of bein' a crook. Patterson killed him."

Dave heard a little cry of anguish, and he stepped quickly over to the girl and put his arm around her. She buried her face in his coat and sobbed heartbrokenly.

"Me and Hub didn't have any hand in that murder," the fellow named Dick went on fearfully. "We'd helped Patterson steal that bunch in the first place. It was his idee to sell 'em to the McCormick kids and then git 'em up here on this desert and steal 'em back again."

"Or murder both kids," Dave rasped.

It was after dark when Dave got Alice and the two prisoners into town and turned the former over to a nurse, and the latter to the sheriff. Then he organized a posse and headed for Devil Creek to recover the body of Sandy McCormick.

TWO DAYS later Dave was back in Deseret. He had got things straightened out for Alice McCormick as well as he could. The original owner of the cattle had been found, and the girl would get back all her money. Dave went directly to the place where he had left Alice. The room was full of women, but he couldn't see the girl who had captivated his heart.

"Isn't Miss McCormick here?" he asked the lady of the house.

"Why, of course. The girl yonder in the plaid dress. Don't you know her?"

Dave stared. In the clothes she wore he never would have known her, except that then he noticed signs of grief on her face. Why, he thought, Alice McCormick was a real woman, a decidedly pretty and desirable woman. Something seemed to turn over inside him.

He went straight to her, and reached for her hand. She looked up at him questioningly, not a sign of recognition in her eyes.

"Alice," he said softly, "don't you know me? Dave Harrup. The fellow who brought you here."

"Oh!" she gasped. "You—your whiskers are gone! I thought you were much older."

Their eyes met in a lingering look.

"Not too old, Alice, do you think?"

"No, Dave," she whispered, and a moment later she was sobbing in his arms as though she belonged there—forever.

Bankin' on a Girl

By Clee Woods

No sacrifice was too great for Old Man Noble to make in order to prevent his daughter marrying into the evil Stanton clan of killers. But he failed to realize the depth of faith, or the strength love gave one man.

IT WAS the first time that Martha Noble ever remembered seeing her father dejected. Now he was decidedly morose as he came out of J. K. Beech's bank in Pinetown and made for his horse hitched to the tamarac tree. He was a man of powerful frame, with coal-black hair and snapping black eyes. Young in appearance for fifty-five, and with a proud heart. A fire-eater too often for his own good.

Martha gave her horse a reluctant pat on the nose, and then made for the bank which her father had left. She slipped into the building by a side door, and walked straight for the small back office of J. K. Beech. She was a slim girl above medium height, with her father's black eyes and hair and a good deal of his fiery nature if aroused to it....

"No, young woman, business is business," the bald, craggy-browed president of the little bank answered her request. "Your father is in a bad way, but he's got only himself to thank. Too many cattle, and his own bank has loans on too many cattlemen in the same boat."

"But the Morton family, five of them, withdrew every dollar they had in the bank yesterday, and their combined ac-

count was the largest of all," Martha argued. "That leaves Papa threatened with a bad run, even though his bank is sound. You've got the cash to tide him over this. Besides, the run might spread to your own bank."

"And I'll keep my cash to meet it," Beech refused her again.

"You can get all the money you need from Butte," Martha countered Banker Beech's last words. "It isn't as though Papa never did you a favor. Nine years ago he put you back on your feet and—"

"Yes, yes, I'm not unmindful of what Gates Noble has done for me," Beech cut in impatiently. "But I've warned him about the times being hard and all. He should have listened and pulled in his loans about forty per cent all around. And sold off his herd sharper than that, as I did."

"I suppose so," said Martha.

She was trying hard not to lose her temper. She suspected that Old Man Beech might be looking to a profit out of her father's financial ruin, if it came to that. The blood drained from her small, pretty face. She turned for the open door.

Nate Stanton was coming through it and he had heard. She knew that Nate was here not just by accident. Many people had heard already that the influential Mortons had withdrawn eighteen thousand dollars in hard cash from her father's bank over in Little Happy, and left it in a bad way to withstand the threatened run.

"Wait a minute, Marty," said Nate, reading the distress in her face.

He brushed past her and strode up to face Beech. A quick, panicky fear swept through her. She did not know what Nate meant to do. He came from a pretty reckless family, so much so that her father had forbidden her ever to see him again. Gates Noble, in fact, had nothing to do with any of the Stanton clan.

There were half a dozen families of the Stantons and they held the entire upper section of Little Happy River against all comers, including the expanding range of Gates Noble. Only Banker Beech had gained a foothold in alongside the Stantons, and he had done that when every Stanton was borrowing money to save old Mike Stanton from the gallows—Nate's own uncle.

There was a good strain in the Stanton blood, fine people, but all of this strain except Nate's parents had moved out and left their bad kinsmen behind. Those on the upper Little Happy were hard customers. That was why Martha's heart was in her throat as she followed Nate back into Beech's office. The Stantons had never forgiven Beech for the way he'd foreclosed without warning, and taken four big slices of range from them.

Martha was more distressed because a smile was on Nate's blond face. Just a thin, wry smile that bespoke nothing at all amusing. His face was slim, thin, and of fine lines, almost delicately chiselled. While he was close to six feet in height, he appeared very slender in comparison to the burly build of her father.

"Nate, be careful," Martha whispered over his shoulder, just as Beech looked up and took off his gold-rimmed glasses.

"You turned Gates Noble down?" Nate accused Beech rather than asked.

His voice was strong and clear, and now it conveyed just a touch of annoyance.

"Why, yes, I had to do it," Beech asserted defensively.

"You got a right smart bunch of cattle over around us Stantons," said Nate. "Had you figured to move 'em out?"

"Why, no, Nate. I need that range badly."

"That's what you said when you took it away from us. I don't reckon you could afford to lose any cattle much over that way either, huh?"

"Of course not, but what're you driving at, Nate?"

"I'm not drivin' at a thing. I'm tellin' you plain out, Beech, that if I had been in your boots, I'd have made that loan to Gates Noble. Looks now like maybe some of my rascally kinfolks might be

sold the idea of running off your cattle."

Nate turned and started out. Martha saw the fear in the banker's face. It was something about Nate Stanton that had done it. Not what he said, nor the Colt forty-four which he wore on his left hip, but a quality of force and command that few men had. Yet he was only twenty-three years old, and that smile seldom ever faded altogether from his rash blue eyes. After all, any Stanton might flare up with guns in his hands, even the best of them.

"You've threatened me, Nate Stanton," said Beech, rallying his courage. "There is a law to protect honest men in their business. And there ought to be a law to protect a girl like Martha from you, too."

Nate whirled as if an electric bolt had shot him around. Three quick strides took him back to face Beech close up. Beech had his hand down in a half-open drawer. Martha's heart stood still. She thought the banker would jerk a gun out and kill Nate before the cowboy could draw.

"Fetch that hand back aboveboard," said Nate.

His voice fell off very low at the end. But Martha knew that Beech would never have the courage to disobey it, for it had a terrible hardness in it. Something harder than years on the Frontier ever puts into a man's voice. She knew now it had been born in him, that deadly quiet in time of danger. Beech put the hand back on the desk top, and it was trembling.

Nate started to tell Beech what he thought of him for the last remark, but he seemed to decide against it. He turned on Martha, who had shifted back nearer the two men. His eyes caught and held hers, and she had never felt such power in any human eyes.

"Do you want to be protected from me, Martha?" he demanded bluntly.

Martha's head swam madly. She had known that she loved this cowboy, rebelliously against her father's wishes, but he had never suspected how desperately she did love him until this moment.

"Say it now," Nate was going on, "or it might be forever too late. You're like that, girl. Once in, you'd never quit. I want you, Martha. I love you till it nearly kills me."

Banker Beech was on his feet, eyes staring half out of his bald head. Martha's heart was pounding so she feared they both would hear it. It was strange love talk, yet so like the impulsive Nate, once he had made up his mind to say it.

"Marry me right away," Nate finished the mad proposal. "Beech will make that loan to your dad, but I want to go to Gates Noble and ask him for his daughter like a man, and without him thinkin' he is in the least beholdin' to me. Will you, girl?"

"Yes, Nate," Martha whispered.

The room was almost flying around her by this time. She'd never been quite sure what she was going to tell Nate, when this time came, if it ever did. Now she knew her father and ten thousand more like him could not stop her.

Nate was taking her into his arms. Not savagely, as she might have supposed, but with a quiet, gentle strength that nearly crushed the breath from her. His lips were on hers, and there was the intensity of all the Stantons in his kiss. Yet something made her feel that he was half afraid this was only a dream, and that he was drinking deep from the dream cup while he could.

At last he was pulling back from her, his fine blue eyes searching her face as though he would seek proof there that it was no dream, that she was his by her own consent. They faced together the harsh reality of things as they were.

Martha was the daughter of Montana's most respected cowman. Nate was from a family that had caused the law as much worry as any other in the state. Even now Leslie Stanton, a second cousin of Nate's, and Ken Olson, who had married Leslie's sister, were hiding out somewhere on the upper Little Happy, after having killed a brakeman and express messenger in

a short-line train holdup. Hard, mean men, despised in any land.

"I'm goin' now to ask him for you," said Nate.

That was like him again. He was mortally proud, sensitive, regardless of the history of the Statons. He had been that way in school, and a new boy only taunted him once about his being from the upper end of the Little Happy. Martha suspected sometimes that she had loved him since those school days, when Nate even at ten years of age could listen to the "big history" class recite its lesson, and then reconstruct the story of battles and men better than any one of the older pupils.

"I'm going with you," Martha told him.

"No," Nate refused, "this is my job."

She knew he was right. Nate was going up alone, man to man, and beard the lion in his own den. It would be nothing less than that. Nate must know that Gates Noble would rather see her dead than married to any Stanton. Yet he was giving her father the chance to accept him as a son-in-law and gentleman, before the fight was on.

"I mean to stay on the Little Happy," Nate said, looking over her shoulder at Beech behind his heavy oak desk. "I'll build up my herd and raise my family here," Nate finished.

It was as if by that statement Nate had laid down his entire life pattern. A pattern cut the hardest way. Not to go away, start in anew. But to stick right here, among the Montana mountains he loved, with the woman he loved, and overcome the odds of inheritance. To live down the prejudice against him because of other Stantons, like Leslie and Leslie's brother-in-law, Ken Olson.

"I'm so happy," Martha whispered her approval. "Go ask Papa."

Nate went out and swung easily to his dapple brown horse with the three white stockings. Five-year-old Nip, the best cut horse that ever bit a steer's rump. Martha followed him.

"Do be careful, Nate," she pleaded. "Don't get mad if—if Papa or Will say things. Will may be the worst. He's wanted me to marry Bryce Wayne for months now."

Will Noble was her brother, and six years older than Martha. He had been pretty wild, off at agricultural college, reports had it, but somehow he had remained eminently respectable. J. Bryce Wayne was a youngish lawyer in town.

"Go find Will and get the money from old Beech," Nate told her. "But don't let your dad know I had anything to do with changin' Beech's mind about the loan."

"God bless you, Nate," Martha whispered, love deep in the soft black eyes that looked up at him. "But, regardless of what Papa says, we'll be married tomorrow."

TWENTY-ODD miles it was over Hemlock Pass and down to the big log house that was home to the proud Nobles. Then eight miles more into the cow and mining town of Little Happy, on the river of the same name. Nate reached the Noble home after dark. He had not tried to overtake Gates Noble on the way. He wanted to go into the man's home, where Martha had been born nineteen years ago, and meet him on an equal footing. This talk was not for the sidewalks in town, or to be made from saddle to saddle on the trail.

Gates Noble was not there when Nate arrived. He had missed him somewhere on the trail, or Noble had turned off on another desperate search for the money which he must have before his Little Happy bank opened at nine o'clock in the morning. Only the cook was at home, buxom Aunt Sue Webb, who had partially filled the place of Martha's dead mother. Nate sat out on the porch and rolled an occasional cigarette while he waited.

When Noble did get in that night around ten, he had Martha and his son Will with him. Will was like his father, big and powerfully built, and he had all

his father's pride with an added touch of arrogance.

"They wouldn't let me stay in town," Martha whispered, coming up to Nate.

Dim light from the lamp in the hall betrayed Martha's nearness to Nate. Her father tramped the porch heavily toward them. Will was close at his side. Both wore guns. Nate intentionally had left his Colt strapped onto his saddle-horn. Will carried a large flour sack well filled with something not very heavy.

"I'd like to see you alone in your office, Mr. Noble," Nate addressed the senior Noble.

"He and I stand together on this," Will Noble snapped, and Nate could see his black eyes afire. "Whatever you've got to say, let's hear it. It's a wonder you didn't bring along your cousin Leslie."

"It's still a private matter between Martha's father and me," Nate insisted, ignoring the taunt about his second cousin.

"I'd advise you to save your breath," Gates Noble rumbled from his broad, deep chest. "No Stanton has ever before set foot in my home."

The two stood facing him, a father and son, both giant men, and the father so young in appearance he might have been Will's older brother.

"There is a Noble goin' to set foot in mine," Nate said, and his voice was falling off quietly again, "but her name will be Stanton then. I've come to ask you for Martha, Mr. Noble."

Nate had expected a sudden violent explosion. Instead, Gates Noble just stood there quite as if the amazing audacity of this young cowboy had left him utterly powerless to open his mouth. Will looked as though he were going to leap at Nate any instant, and try to tear him to pieces. Will's most redeeming quality had been an ardent love for his sister.

When Gates Noble did speak, his voice was filled with scorn for the presumptuous young man who wanted his daughter. But actual pain was in his words, too. Anguish was deep in his eyes.

"I suppose," he said, "that you figure you'd humble the Nobles a great deal by getting Martha. Also, that you'll feather your nest, and stand to get half of what I'm worth when I'm gone. Well, if Martha marries you, I'll cut her off with just one dollar in my will. I mean that. But I'm not worth as much today as you might think. I've just borrowed thirty-five thousand dollars hard cash to stop a run on my bank in the morning. There it is, in that sack."

He motioned toward the flour sack which Will still held in his left hand —a sack full of money from Beech's bank. Money the Nobles wouldn't have, except for Nate's help.

"I'll give you that money and let my bank go broke," said Gates Noble, "if you'll clear out of the country, and never let Martha see you or hear from you again."

The blunt, cold-blooded proposal made a brittle tenseness fall over the porch. Will Noble's hand moved a trifle nearer the handle of his six-shooter, as if he were afraid the insult would prove to be more than Nate Stanton would stand. Martha stood in the pale light by the door, not daring to breathe, but fire was kindling in her black eyes.

"Do you, Will," Nate's low words broke the silence, "do you join in that offer?"

Nate thought he heard a slight gasp escape from Martha. She thought he was going to take them up.

"Martha," Nate said to her before Will answered, "would you mind goin' to your room for the present?"

"Why, no," she stammered, "I—I'll go. Just as you want it, Nate."

As she passed into the hall and went up the stairs, Nate saw that she was hardly able to stand up, her knees had grown so weak. The tap of her small feet on the boards of the stairway echoed dully through the whole house. The two Nobles remained in front of Nate, as if they had him at bay and

meant to make their kill here and now. Martha's door closed upstairs.

"That your offer, too?" Nate again demanded of Will.

"Yes, of course," said Will Noble.

The words were hardly off his lips when Nate leaped at him. Never did a crouching panther make a swifter, surer leap. Be it said to Will's credit, he did not attempt to draw his gun against a man who was clearly unarmed. But he did try to throw up his hands and smash back the cowboy from the upper Little Happy.

It was a futile move. Nate's right fist shot past Will's hands as they came up, and landed hard against the brother's jaw. His left slashed in swiftly after the right. Will's blocky head jerked backward twice in rapid succession, and his knees began to crumple.

"Try that on me!" Gates Noble cried.

He leaped for Nate. Nate stood stock-still for an instant, debating whether to hit Martha's father or not. That was why he had asked Will to repeat the insult, so he could have somebody near his own age against whom to vent his rage.

Nate's hesitation, short as it was, proved disastrous. Gates Noble, thinking surely that Nate would fight him, landed a hard, looping right against Nate's jaw. It rocked him backward. Noble hit him over the heart with the next quick blow. Nate tried to backpedal. Noble hit him again on the jaw. Nate fell, out cold.

WHEN Nate regained consciousness, he was in the big living-room where elk heads on the wall and bear rugs on the floor told of the hunting abilities of the men who lived there. Nate sat up and looked about him. A marble clock on the mantle told him it was almost midnight. A light burned on the table. And beside it was that white sack. Anger swept over Nate again at sight of it. Their lousy bribe! But what about it now? Why was it left here?

"Hey, Gates Noble!" he called.

There was no answer. He went into the hall and called repeatedly. He was alone in the big place. Now he began to see through it. They had left him alone with the money, thinking that the sight of hard cash would tempt him yet to run away with it. He looked into the bag, thumbed into the packets of bills. No mistaking it, it was real money, and the bag was just as bulging now as it had been when Will carried it onto the porch.

"They still want to get rid of me that bad," Nate thought. "So bad they'll see their bank busted, if I'll only clean out with their money."

Where was Martha? That was what puzzled him most. And what was he going to do with this money? He felt like walking right out and leaving it where they had left it. But that might be used against him, if some third party were to get hold of the cash. He had to see it back safely in Noble's hands. Yet if he were to start out of here with it, he might be trapped and accused of accepting the bribe, or of intention to steal the money outright. Gates Noble might not resort to such trickery, but Nate was not so sure Will wouldn't.

Nate waited through two puzzling hours, and still had the house and money to himself. He left the treasure bag on the table, shoved chairs against the two doors of the living-room and lay down on the long leather couch. It was hours before he slept. What had become of Martha? She still trusted him; he knew that. Maybe she had consented to this test of honesty, but she would know beforehand just what he was going to do about it.

Nate cooked his own breakfast the next morning and nobody came to share it with him. The flour sack remained on the table. He looked into it again, just to make sure. The money was still there. Thirty-five thousand dollars—what a man could do with that! But it was no temptation to Nate Stanton. It would

serve Gates Noble and son right to run off with it. But Nate wasn't built that way, and he had a girl worth this whole roomful of money. Then he made up his mind—he'd deliver the money to Noble's own bank.

He allowed himself ample time to ride to town by nine o'clock. He was doing that for Martha, not the other Nobles. She was all wrapped up in her dad, and, of course, what hurt him hurt her. That was why he had intervened in behalf of the loan in the first place, back in Pinetown. For Martha's sake.

Nate found his horse Nip outside, with his gun still on the horn. He buckled the gunbelt around his waist and tied the flour sack to his saddle-horn, so he could watch it every minute of that ride. He watched rocks, trees and humps of ground ahead, too, for sign of movement. No telling what he might run into.

Alert as he was, however, Nate was almost caught flatfooted. Some two miles above the town of Little Happy, he had to ford shallow Little Happy River. He felt safe. From here on, the wagon road led down an open bottom. Anybody who wanted to try anything funny would have picked the deep canyon from which he had just emerged, or the pass further back.

Nip was in water well above the tops of his three white stockings. The horse was making a good deal of noise splashing in the deep water. The ford passed just below some rocks which lifted out of the water enough to catch a small pine tree and some driftwood. Nate only glanced at the driftwood, without suspicion of it.

Suddenly, two men bobbed up from the top of the lodged pine. They were slightly behind Nate, and each had a gun in his hand. Nate had not stopped to think this far ahead, just what he would do if such a thing as this came up. Now, all at once, he realized the gravity of his predicament. If he allowed himself to be robbed of this bag of money, he would be accused of complicity with the robbers when he told of the holdup, or the story of robbery would be scoffed away entirely by the Nobles. If the Nobles had planned this holdup just to make him out the worst Stanton of all in Martha's eyes—and Nate felt it was not entirely beyond Will Noble—they would have him caught cold. They'd win. That is, if he did not fight.

All this flashed through Nate's head within two seconds, before he tried to turn his head and look. He had heard the low, patently disguised voice commanding him, "Lift 'em kid, and be careful!"

The next instant Nate was tearing the money bag loose, and flinging himself sideways on his horse, falling into the water. Two guns roared bullets close past him as he fell. He had expected that, and he meant to fight it out with them.

When Nate struck the water, he had his gun in his hand. It spat its angry fire back toward the nearest man. That man had a mask over his face, but even as Nate fired, he recognized the fellow. Ken Olson, an ex-convict who had married into the Stanton clan. The man just beyond him was Leslie Stanton, Nate's second cousin. In the same second that Nate put a bullet through Olson's breast, that second cousin was ripping a hot slug of lead through Nate's right thigh. Olson was falling across a pine bough.

It was kill or be killed. Stanton blood against Stanton blood. The good against the bad. Leslie Stanton was a killer, even to spilling his own family blood. He was after that thirty-five thousand dollars. Somehow he had got wind of its coming.

"You always," he cried at Nate, "did think yourself better than any other Stanton. Take this!"

He was crashing another bullet Nate's way. The leaden slug struck Nate in the right side and jerked his body around. Then Nate let him have it. The ball struck Leslie in the forehead and took him backward into the water.

As Nate had anticipated when he tore

the flour sack from the saddle horn, Nip had run off to the river bank during the fight. Nate made for him. He was going sick all over, from the two wounds. Blood was running down his side, where a bullet had nipped the outer edge of the lung.

Carrying the flour sack, he eased up to Nip. But Nip smelled the blood, snorted and made off. Nate could never catch him. And without him he might not be able to make it to town before he passed out. He did not believe his wounds would be fatal, barring unforeseen complications. But it meant a lot to deliver that money before nine o'clock.

Just then Ken Olson emitted a low cry. Nate looked back. Olson was struggling, trying to get to his feet. Nate watched, dismayed. Olson was falling into the water, blinded and sick unto death. But trying to make his way out, nevertheless.

"Help me!" he was shouting. "Nate, where are you? Don't let me drown!"

That from a man who had just tried to murder him. But now Olson had no gun, and he was a pitiful wretch indeed. He fell into the water, and barely pulled up. Nate put the flour sack down and hurried back to him. He began to fear he would never reach the man. He himself was so sick he hardly could walk on the slippery rocks at the bottom of the river. Much of this might make him bleed to death.

But he reached Olson, got the ex-convict's arm about his neck and started out with him. Olson fainted on the way. Nate had to carry and drag him to the bank. He fell down on the sand with Olson and lay there, trying to get back his strength.

Olson regained his senses, twisted over and looked at Nate. "You done it for me, boy," he murmured.

Then, sensing the fact that he was near death, Olson became hysterical, started to cry. He repented of his sin against Nate, begged his forgiveness.

"How did you know about me comin' with that money?" Nate asked.

"A stranger come to me and Leslie and told us."

"You don't know who it was?"

"No, honest. Nate, I'm—"

Olson swooned away. Nate could not shake him awake. He had to get going. A doctor might save Olson yet. Nate got his flour sack and started that hard two miles into town. He'd never make it, he knew, unless somebody happened along and picked him up.

He reflected as he weaved along the road. Who was that stranger who had put Olson and Leslie Stanton onto his trail? Who knew about the thirty-five thousand except the Nobles and old Beech?

Nate made half a mile. Then three men came riding up from behind him. He knew them, one a Cross Y cowhand, and two ranchers from down the river. Nate sat down and waited for them to give him a lift.

But they left the road and circled around him. "You don't get us messed up in no trouble you've stirred up," the Cross Y cowpuncher called.

"We're in a hurry," one of the ranchers supplemented, as if to cover his shame. "Might be a run on the bank, and I got to git my dough outa there before she busts."

"I've got the money here to stop that run," Nate called. "Thirty-five thousand dollars. Noble's own money."

"As if he would trust thirty-five thousand to any Stanton at a time like this," the Cross Y cowboy scoffed.

Nate saw he was going to be left. He jerked up his six-shooter and levelled it.

"Fetch me a horse, or I'll drop one of you. You, Lusher, fetch me that old gray."

The men stood stock-still, debating in low voices. They were a good hundred yards away, but most any Stanton could hit a man a long ways, and Nate was reported to be the best shot of them all. The man Lusher came riding to him. Nate made him hold the snorting old gray horse while he climbed on. Then,

on his way, he wondered if he could stay in the saddle till he got there.

IT LACKED only a few minutes of the time that the Little Happy Bank had to open. Martha faced her father and brother in the inner office. Gates Noble was not a banker like Beech, but a cowman who was regretting bitterly his attempt at banking. The big, black-eyed father shook an angry finger in Martha's white face.

"Martha, I bought you from Nate Stanton for thirty-five thousand dollars," he said. "The minute that front door opens, the price ruins me. Disgraces Will and you and me. But I could take it with a smile if I were only sure that you're cured of that cowboy from the upper Little Happy."

"Nate will be here with that money," Martha vowed.

"I've gambled my fortune that he won't," Noble cried. "And what do I get for it? My daughter's impudence, and her stark folly. Listen, if you're so sure of Nate Stanton, then why don't you gamble something on him, like I have against him?"

"I have, Papa—everything a woman can gamble. But name your stakes."

"This, then," Noble barked. "If Nate fails to show up with that money, then you give me your solemn word never to see him or listen to him again."

"Somebody might stop him—purposely," said Martha, glancing at Will.

Will Noble stirred uneasily under Martha's searching look. Will had been in a sullen, bitter mood the past hour.

"No matter what happens, Martha," he said, "it was all done for your good, nothing else."

"What have you done, Will?" Martha pleaded, shaking him by the shoulder.

"Will has done nothing," Gates vowed. "If Nate Stanton runs away with that money, Martha, are you going to give him up? Will you gamble that promise on your precious lover?"

"Yes, I will. If Nate runs away with that money, then my stakes in the game are mighty small. It's a go, Papa."

"Then, Smith," said Noble to his cashier, "go throw that door open and see me go broke."

Gates Noble was like that; he had principles, along with his pride and fire.

Cashier Smith was very pale as he turned the key in the front door. He knew that Gates Noble was weakened enough financially to go down in the imminent crash.

Martha expected to see men come rushing and fighting for the one cage window, each determined to be first to draw his money out. But there was no rush. Old Granny Beale came toddling in ahead of everybody else. Outside, the gallant cowboys and miners had agreed that poor old Granny should be the first to rescue what she had saved by washing for miners. Behind her an orderly line formed.

"Don't try to stall for time," Martha urged the cashier. "That would only destroy what confidence anybody has left. Nate will be here before it's too late."

But that hungry line kept eating in, minute by minute. The bank's low cash was dwindling rapidly. A hundred people were still in line. Martha began to grow afraid. Terribly afraid, until it made her cold all the way to her heart. She had finally agreed to leave Nate at her home, to face that double temptation of running off with thirty-five thousand dollars, and at the same time avenging himself against two men who hated him.

Will Noble grew more disturbed. Sweat was oozing out over his face. Martha watched him with fear. She maneuvered him back against a vault door.

"Will, what have you done?" she demanded, her black eyes boring hard into the brother's ashen face.

"Nothing, nothing," Will denied. "That is, except what I had to do in order to protect my sister."

"And what was that?"

"Aw, don't bother me," Will flew into

a temper. "You've been enough grief to us already, ruining Papa like this and disgracing us and—"

He stopped. Every head in the line was turned back away from the cashier's window and up the street. There came a man on an old gray horse. A man with blood smeared down his side, lying half out on his horse's neck, to hold on. Beneath him was the flour sack, spotted with his own blood but safe.

Martha ran for the door, tore through the line of amazed people. "Now you'll get your money!" she cried to the depositors. "Nate's got enough in that flour sack to take care of every account in this line and then more."

"Yes, yes, there's your money," Gates Noble seconded her. "Plenty of it."

Martha was helping Nate slide from the horse. He insisted on carrying the bag himself into the bank. Martha threw his arm over her shoulder to help him. Her pretty black head came up, and pride flamed in her eyes as she faced that line of depositors.

Her father looked into the bag. The money was there. He was man enough to admit that he had been wrong; that one Stanton, at least, was on the level, and a real man.

"Folks," the cowman banker called, "I made a bet with my Martha that Nate Stanton would turn out like most of the other Stantons, give him enough temptation. I bet my bank almost and my ranch, you might say, against my daughter's hand. And now I'm right happy to say I've lost Martha—and you all are invited to the wedding just as soon as Nate's able to get hitched up double."

Nate and Will Noble were facing each other. Will looked afraid, terribly afraid. Especially when Nate said, "Ken Olson is bad wounded, up at the ford. You better go see him, Will. But I'm afraid he's dead by now."

"Did—did Olson—"

Nate thrust out his hand to Will to break off the question. He had a lot to forgive in the Nobles, especially Will. But he was going to spend a lot of time in the valley near them, and they were Martha's folks. He did not want to make sure that Will had sent a stranger to tell Leslie and Olson about his coming with that money.

"He wouldn't tell me a thing," Nate said to Will.

Will wrung Nate's hand and then rushed out to get a horse. Martha whirled and flung two arms about her man, gripping herself tight to him.

Old Granny Beale came pushing up with her wad of greenbacks. "Take it back, Mr. Smith," she cackled delightedly, faded old eyes on the young couple there in each other's arms. "Why should I bother to draw out my eighty dollars, when Nate Stanton is jest drawed the whole Noble fortune, to my way o' seein' things?"

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11-10-39

A Serial — Part Four

Desert Death

By Amos Moore

THE STORY SO FAR:

MOLLY MANNING, owner of Dust Pan property.

RED MUNDY, Federal officer disguised as a famous killer.

THOMAS BRENT, Molly's old man of all work.

NICK DILLWORTH, Free and Easy Saloon owner.

FLOYD DILLWORTH, Nick's headstrong son.

SPIDER BARWOOD, Floyd's murderous pal.

SCAR LIVERMORE and SQUINT SUTTON, Nick's hired killers.

BUCK LARRABEE, LUKE CHRISTIE and DEPUTY SHERIFF BOB CHRISTIE, possemen.

The Federal officer, Red Mundy, who is posing as a gunman in order to win the confidence of and capture the Dillworth gang of thieves and killers, becomes greatly attached to Molly after he saves her from the advances of Nick's hirelings. Nick is desperately anxious to buy or steal Molly's property because her well, which has recently come in, threatens to divert trail herd drives from his town and ruin his saloon business.

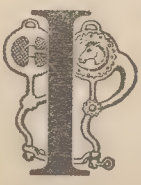
Red pretends to side with Floyd when he and his father disagree over the advisability of holding up the bank in Sterlington. Nick feels such a robbery will bring the wrath of the Federal men down on them, little realizing Red's fellow officers are already tipped off. Unable to stop Floyd, Nick pays Sheriff Biff Leonard to kill his own son, Floyd, at the bank robbery. Instead, Leonard himself is killed in the bank hold-up, which is a complete fiasco because Leonard has not taken either the bank or the Federal men into his confidence and there is a general massacre.

Red, Floyd and Spider escape, however—and Red becomes a lone fugitive in the Dust Pan, with the posse hot on his trail. He heads for Molly's shack and she gives him protection, although she doesn't know he isn't a killer.

As Molly is bringing a horse to Red, she is stopped by Nick who suspects that she is protecting Red, but doesn't know Red is hiding in her cabin.

CHAPTER XVIII

Otherwise Blackmail



"I TOLD you to leave—" Molly began a breathless protest when Nick started to enter her cabin.

"Yeah!" Nick Dillworth interrupted roughly, "and now I'm tellin' you! Climb down off that hawss and go inside and make a

light. We've got business to do, and we'll have to be able to see if we're goin' to get it done right. Climb down!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" the girl declared defiantly.

"Oh, yes, you will, and you'll do it damn quick!" Nick Dillworth reached out and grasped the mare's reins. "Do you take me for a fool, blind and deef and half-witted, not to guess what you was up to?"

"I—"

"Did you reckon I'd swallowed that sheep-dip about your ridin' to my town, to get there in the middle of the night? Without no coat or hat, and your feet in them slipper things? Hell! You can mebbe pull the wool over the eyes of that bunch of dumb deputies, but not over Nick Dillworth's, you can't. Get down!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Molly declared; but even she herself realized the weakness of the assertion, was aware of the undertone of fear and uncertainty in her own voice.

"You don't, huh?" Dillworth sneered. "Nor I s'pose you don't know where Red Mundy's hid, neither! Well, I do! He's in the brush, down yonder a ways. That's why you was in such a tearin' hurry to get a-past me. You was takin' that hawss to him! Now, you're goin' to do like I tell you, else I'll fetch that

posse back here and turn 'em loose after him! You ready to sell me this property now?"

For a moment, Molly sat silent, staring unseeing at the huge, hairy hand that gripped the mare's bridle, her mind racing. Nick Dillworth didn't suspect that Red Mundy was in the shack; but once let him call the possemen back and tell them what he really did suspect, they would begin to put two and two together. Bob Christie might not doubt her; but his brother and Buck Larrabee, to mention only a couple of the other seven, would certainly wonder whether or not she had told them the truth in the beginning.

And if they suspected her, they would watch her, watch the shack. Probably they would insist on searching the shack. Or—with Red Mundy's reputation what it was—burning the shack. Whatever they did would put an end, once and for all, to Red Mundy's chance for escape. He would be surrounded; taken; killed. . . .

Without a word, Molly Manning dismounted, threw the mare's reins. Her feet, in their small, soft house moccasins, made no noise as she crossed the porch; but the flimsy boards creaked under Nick Dillworth's heavy following tread. And, to make doubly sure that adequate advance warning of the saloon man's presence should precede him, she stopped in the doorway, saying in a voice that she knew would carry clearly to Red Mundy in the back room:

"I haven't any matches on me, Mr. Dillworth. If you'll let me have one? Thanks. Just a minute, now. Wait here on the porch till I light the lamp and you can see where you're going."

Purposely, she dropped the match. She fumbled around for it on the floor for several seconds, straining her ears meanwhile for a rustle, a creak, a vibration, to tell her that Red Mundy had made his exit safely by way of the back door or the window in the bedroom. It was pitch black outside. He could hide there easily.

"And then he can slip around and get Nick Dillworth's horse," she thought. "He can take my horse, too—drive it off. He can be mounted and away down the trail before Dillworth guesses he's been tricked and raises the alarm. He's got to get away—got to!"

She scratched the match on a chair, held the little yellow cone of flame to the wick of the old-fashioned lamp. The brightening light showed the supper table, with its checked green-and-white cloth, the dishes she and Tom Brent had used. The thick shadows drew back to the far corners of the room.

"Very well, Mr. Dillworth. Come in and say what you have to say to me," she said; and was surprised that she could control her voice, could make it sound so cool and aloof and indifferent.

"'Twon't take long." Nick Dillworth strode ponderously over to the table, flung back a corner of the cloth. He took a folded and not too clean paper from the inside pocket of his coat, and, with something of a flourish, slapped it down before her.

"There. Read that, young lady. I knowed I was goin' to be able to make you see reason. But I didn't figure on your bein' so obligin' as to show me how to open your eyes! Read that there."

Puzzled, at first, then with a growing sense of anger and indignation, Molly Manning read through the few neatly inscribed lines of the document. It bore the date of the fourth of the month—a date nearly three weeks previous. It began, "Whereas I, Molly Manning," it went on to state that, in consideration of the sum of one thousand dollars, "cash in hand paid, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged by me," she, Molly Manning, had granted to Nicholas Dillworth, a two-thirds interest in her property, known as the Dust Pan Valley, the said two-thirds interest to include any mineral or water rights that might then

exist or subsequently be found upon the said property.

A final clause provided that, in the event that she, the said Molly Manning, decided in the future to dispose of her remaining one-third interest, or was unable or unwilling, "for any reason whatsoever," to work it in full cooperation with the owner of the major portion, she granted the said Nicholas Dillworth a prior option and opportunity to purchase and acquire for his own exclusive use and benefit her said remaining one-third interest, "on terms that have been mutually agreed and decided on."

On the bottom of the paper, at the right, was a blank line—for her signature. Above it was the phrase, "And I hereby subscribe my name, in the presence of two witnesses, who saw me sign and who sign with me." The names of the "witnesses" had already been filled in on the two lines at the lower left. They were laborious, illiterate scrawls, but they were perfectly legible. Molly read, "John Livermore." "William Sutton." Two of Nick's hired killers! Then she read the entire document through again, hot color rising in her cheeks. She lifted wrathful blue eyes, and met the narrow, hooded gaze of Nick Dillworth. His face wore a grin of sly and satisfied triumph.

"I reckon you understand it, don't you?" said he. "It's drawed up so's 'most anybody could—and you're a real smart girl."

"I understand it, all right, Mr. Dillworth! But if you think I'm going to assign two-thirds of my land to you for a thousand dollars, which you haven't paid me, or for ten times that amount, you're crazy! I wouldn't sell you a foot of the Dust Pan for any sum you could name, understand me? Not a single foot!"

Nick Dillworth's sly grin widened.

"Oh, yes, you would, Molly," said he. "You have! You sold to me on the 4th, like that paper says, and Scar Livermore and Squint Sutton seen you do it. They seen you sign your name to that paper, and they signed as witnesses. They'll swear to it. Your well hadn't come in, then, you remember, and your cash was runnin' low. You come to me and asked me would I help you out with a thousand dollars. That was the 4th—the day you drove round to the Bend and got a load o' feed for Tom Brent's mules. You'll recall that, huh? And you hadn't ought to have no trouble recallin' how we talked things over, and I made you a fair and square business offer."

"Nick Dillworth, have you gone loco? Or do you think I have?" Molly demanded, her blue eyes flashing. In her righteous indignation, she had almost forgotten to listen for the sound of the horses outside—the sound of Red Mundy, riding safely away.

"Never was saner in my life, young lady. And, when you've thought things over, you'll see what a smart stroke of business you done when you signed that paper—on the 4th. Sign it now, Molly, without no more argufying, else I'll let off my gun and bring Bob Christie and them along a-snortin'! I want this property; you want Mundy to get clean away. All right. I'll sell you his life for a two-thirds interest in this here well. That's a straight business offer."

"I call it blackmail!" the girl retorted hotly.

"Call it anything you like. But make up your mind. I ain't got all night to stay here palaverin' with you." Nick Dillworth put his hand on the butt of his gun. "Which is it to be? You signin' that agreement and me givin' you my word of honor I won't interfere no way with Red Mundy showin' the law his dust, or—?" The fat, hairy fingers caressed the gun-butt significantly. "Take your choice!"

The girl took hold of the edge of the table to steady herself. Outside, one of the horses stamped impatiently.

"But how do I know you'll keep your word?" she faltered.

"Why, it'll be to my interest to keep

it! That paper's dated three weeks ago, the day a lot of folks knows you was in Silver Bend and could have had a talk with me just as well as not. I wouldn't want it to come out that we hadn't done no business together until tonight, or that I'd put—er, any pressure on you to sign.

"Me," he leered at her, "I don't give a hoot in hell about Red Mundy. You do. Well, you sign, and you give me your word you won't try to squirm outa the agreement afterwards. I'll pay you the thousand dollars, just to make things look better with folks, includin' your precious Tom Brent, and I'll give you my word, like I said, to go on home and let you do what you damn please about that hawss you were taking to Mundy. I'll even send you a couple of good hands tomorrow to help string wire and finish buildin' them chutes. Havin' a personal stake in the revenoo from this fine new well, I'll be right glad to do that!

"Come, now," he added, his voice roughening, "you've been stallin' long enough. Put your name on that blank line, and do it now, or we'll see what Bob Christie has to say about your fixin' to help a dirty murderer beat the rope. Are you goin' to sign?"

Slowly, very slowly, Molly Manning went across the room to a low shelf nailed against the side wall. She took down a pen and a bottle of ink and, with dragging footsteps, returned to the table. Nick Dillworth drew out a chair, and she sank into it.

"Now you're bein' real sensible. I thought you would!"

She uncorked the bottle, dipped the pen into the ink.

"Put your name there, on the line that's been left blank, at the bottom of the sheet," Nick Dillworth instructed her, and there was an eager urgency in his voice. "Then I'll pay you the thousand dollars I've brought, and be on my way. Go ahead; sign!"

He was behind her chair as her pen slowly, very slowly, began to move over the paper. It made a queer, protesting little noise, something between a scratch and a squeak.

Over the girl's shoulder, Nick Dillworth's hooded eyes dwelt on each letter of the name as the rusty nib of the pen formed it. He craned his neck, the better to see. The shadow of his great, squat figure lengthened on the wall; lengthened until it resembled nothing so much as the shadow of some obscene bird of prey, ugly and menacing, brooding over her, waiting . . . waiting. . . . His fat, stubby fingers, wet now with the sweat of excited anticipation, went to the butt of his forty-five, slipped the weapon out of its holster.

The muzzle of the forty-five came up, stealthy inch by stealthy inch, behind the back of the unsuspecting girl. Waiting. . . .

The small, squeaky scratch of the pen as it traced the last letters of her name, was the only sound in the taut, sinister silence of the room. Nick Dillworth's face was one broad, evil grin of triumph as she wrote that last syllable.

Suddenly, a low, harsh voice spoke from the shadows, where the folds of the dividing curtains hung.

"Don't try it, Dillworth!" it said. "Drop that gun and put your hands up, or you're a dead man!"

CHAPTER XIX

"Many a Slip—"

NICK DILLWORTH'S gloating grin was wiped off his face as swiftly and completely as tracings in the sand are obliterated by the wash of an inrushing wave. The forty-five dropped from his fingers and thudded to the floor. His dark, wrinkled skin was underlaid with a pasty pallor as he slowly turned toward the man who was covering him.

"Get over there, by the wall!" Red

ordered, and stepped from the sheltering shadow of the curtains. "Close to it. And keep your hands up where I can see 'em, or I won't even wait!"

"Wait?" Nick Dillworth repeated. Backed against the side wall of the shack, hands raised above shoulder height, somehow, he seemed to have shrunk in size. "Wait for what? What are you goin' to do?"

"I'm goin' to kill you, Dillworth, like I would ary other sidewinder, beggin' the snake's pardon for comparin' you with it. But I couldn't call to mind anything lower."

Nick Dillworth muttered, between shallow, uneven breaths:

"You don't dare kill me, Mundy. Remember, if that posse—"

"I am rememberin' 'em, which is why I haven't blasted you to hell already. But after I've bent the barrel of this gun over your head, you won't be no more interested in robbery and murder than if I'd put a slug through your crooked heart!"

There was a stark, cold savagery in Red Mundy's voice that sent a shudder through the girl. She had risen from her chair and was standing with both hands tightly gripping its back.

"No!" she exclaimed, in horrified protest. "No, Red, you can't do that. You can't kill him!"

"And why not?" He flashed a quick glance at her, but there was no softening either of his eyes or of his voice. "Haven't you got wise yet to what he was fixin' to do to you?"

"Yes. I know he was going to rob me. He couldn't buy my well, so he meant to steal it. But you can't kill him in cold blood for that, Red."

"Not for that, mebbe. But for what else he was goin' to do—shoot you in the back the minute you'd finished signin' your name to that phoney paper!"

"No! No! He wouldn't—"

"I saw him with his gun trained on you, all set to blaze away! The shot would've fetched Christie, of course. But by the time Christie got here, you'd have been dead, and Dillworth would have been shoutin' that 'twas I killed you! He'd have sent the posse high-tailin' down to where he thought I was hid, waitin' for you to bring me your hawss. Eight of 'em—and keno for me!"

"But he gave me his word of honor that he'd let you go."

"His word of *what?*" Red jeered. "And you believed him?"

"Yes. If I signed over my well, what good—why—"

"Why?" Red Mundy's cold, harsh voice was still pitched low; it wouldn't have carried a foot away from the shack. And yet it gave an effect as if it had been raised to a shout. "Why? Because he wouldn't stop at anything to get hold of this land, that's why! And he figured the worth of your word by his own—nothing!

"You called the turn when you said he was blackmailin' you. He wasn't goin' to give you the chance to change your mind later. If he'd plugged you, that deed, or whatever it was you signed, would have gone into his pocket and stayed there till he got ready to show it. Then there'd be nobody to bring up any awkward questions, except mebbe old Tom Brent, and Tom would have met with a sad accident in a day or two, so his mouth would have been shut for keeps, too!"

"It's a lie, Molly," Nick Dillworth croaked. "I wouldn't have hurt a hair of your pretty head; you know that. All I wanted was to protect my business round at the Bend. I explained to you—"

"Yeah; you explained to her that you was goin' to take over her well, lock, stock, and barrel, else you'd turn me in, Dillworth. Well, you ain't goin' to turn me in, and you ain't goin' to get the well. Molly Manning's got her paper, and I've got you—right where I want you. I've thought for some time that you kind o' needed killin'. Now, I'm sure of it. I'm handin' you a one-way ticket to—"

"No," Molly broke in decisively,

"you're not going to do anything of the sort, Red. I won't stand for it. I dare say he does need killing, but not by you. Hand him over to the law!"

"The law, hell! How much chance of handin' him over to the law have I got? Right now, the law's campin' on my trail. If it catches up with me, it'll serve me the way I'm servin' him!"

"All right; then I'll hand him over—after you've left! I've got a little something to say about what should be done with him, it seems to me. I made the original bargain with him."

"In other words, you made a deal with him to let me get away, and so you think you ought to be let dictate the terms of this one?"

Red Mundy's eyes flashed toward her again, shifted back to the face of Nick Dillworth, where a more normal color was gradually taking the place of the pasty pallor. Nick Dillworth had had the fright of his life. He knew that there was nothing on earth he could have said or done to move Red Mundy to show him mercy. But this chicken-hearted girl, now; if she stuck to her stand. . . .

"Exactly!" said Molly Manning. Her head was high and her chin was firm. "After all, I—I did make the deal, Red."

"Uh-huh; you did." Red Mundy hesitated, then shrugged with seeming indifference. "Have it your way, if you like; you're the doctor. You've played this game with your own chips, I reckon. But if you won't let me put his light out, you'll have to fetch me a rope—there's a line on his saddle, likely—and I'll need a bunch of rags to gag him with. Go get 'em. And you," he glared at Nick Dillworth with sudden ferocity, "just open your mouth to let out one peep, or make a funny move, and you'll wake up fryin' in hell, where I'd ought to send you, whether or no! Don't you forget, Dillworth, 'there's many a slip'—and I've got a long arm!"

Nick Dillworth didn't make any funny moves. He didn't open his mouth, except when ordered to, so that a wadded-up bandanna might be crammed between his distended jaws. He was only too thankful to do precisely as he was told, only too glad to submit to whatever treatment Red Mundy chose to mete out to him. He was alive!

Alive—and the game wasn't played out yet! Not by a long chalk, it wasn't, even though he had been bound, hand and foot, to a heavy wooden chair, and thrust behind the curtains into the hot, stifling darkness of the back room of the shack. His wrists were fastened behind him, and coil upon coil of his own stout rope held his body stiffly upright, lashed to the chair back. His ankles were tied to its rungs and legs. A thick woollen blanket was tucked under his feet, so that even if he did succeed in touching his heels to the floor, he couldn't stamp them to attract attention.

The ropes were tightly drawn. They hurt his fat limbs. The bandanna gag was more than uncomfortable, for the wide strip of cloth that held it in his mouth pushed it hard down against his tongue and half choked him. He was as helpless as a plump capon, trussed for the oven. But he was alive! He had lost this trick, to be sure, and lost it just when it had seemed that he held all the trumps. But there would be other tricks, and already he was scheming how to win them. No, the game wasn't played out yet!

Red Mundy had closed the front door of the shack, so that only small, pale yellow squares of light from the windows showed in the impenetrable gloom. There was still half an hour or more before the full moon would rise. On the narrow porch, where the darkness was like thick black velvet folds enshrouding them, Red took both of the girl's hands in his own and drew her close to him.

She did not resist him. She stood silent, quiescent, submissive, giving no outward sign of the conflicting emotions that racked her. His touch filled

her with a glad, exultant joy; a joy that would not be denied, although she despised herself for feeling it. Her whole world seemed to have crashed in fragments about her, and left her groping bewilderedly in empty space for the old standards of right and wrong that had once been as fixed and immutable as the stars—the standards which, to her own unhappiness and confusion, she had flung away, abandoned, for—yes, for love.

Because she was in love! In love with a desperado, a robber, a cold-blooded murderer. In love with a man whom her own eyes had shown her to be utterly ruthless and savage and cruel. Of all the many men she had known in her life, this, the notorious killer, Red Mundy, should have been the very last who could have won her heart. Yet he had won it. She did love him. She loved him for better or worse. She always would. The knowledge shamed her, abased her self-respect, as she had never thought it could be abased.

"Molly, listen to me." He had bent his head above hers; his voice was a rapid whisper, close to her ear. "Listen to me carefully. You've been wonderful, little girl. I haven't got the words to tell you how wonderful, or what your help has meant to me. It isn't only that you've saved my life, more than once. It's that you cared enough about me, a crook, an outlaw on the dodge, to be willin' to give up everything—your property, your stake for a comfortable future, your own high ideals—just to give me a chance to go free.

"If I'd been the criminal you thought me—but, Molly, I'm not. I know now that I can trust you, and tell you the truth that I didn't dare tell you before. I'm not a criminal. I'm not Red Mundy; I'm only impersonatin' him. Mundy's dead but no one knows it. I'm a United States Marshal, and I've been workin' for months to trap a desperate gang of crooks. You believe me, don't you, Molly? . . . Molly, did you understand me?"

She didn't. Not at first. The reaction was too great, the relief too overwhelming. She couldn't believe that she was hearing aright or that, after all her shame and self-disgust, intuition, rather than logic or reason, had guided her in the right way.

"A—a United States Marshal, after a desperate gang of crooks," she stammered. The words seemed to say themselves, in meaningless repetition of his, inanely, stupidly. "W-what gang of crooks?"

"The Dillworths. Nick and Floyd are both in it, up to their necks, though I don't know which of 'em is the more dangerous! We expected to get Floyd and one of his right-hand men, Spider Barwood, in that Stockmen's Trust hold-up this mornin'. But our plans at the bank all went haywire when the sheriff's men horned in, and Floyd and Barwood slipped through our fingers—got clean away."

"But the posse was chasing you, Red! Why—"

"Chasin' Red Mundy," he corrected. "They thought I was one of the gang. I was. I still am. I'm workin' on 'em from the inside. Except for my own men, you're the only one who knows that, Molly. You're the only one, except old Tom, who *can* know it, until we're set again and ready to nab the whole lot. With any luck a-tall, we're goin' to do that tonight, and I want you to help me, Molly. Will you?"

Molly Manning's knees were weak under her. Her head was awhirl. She couldn't grasp all the implications of this tremendous piece of news that Red Mundy had told her. She still thought of him as Red Mundy, although, of course, that was not his true name.

"Help you? Why, of course, I will, Red," she said simply. "I'll do anything you say."

"Good girl!" His grip on her hands tightened warmly. "I knew I could count on you! Now, I want you to

listen close, and remember everything I tell you, so that there won't be no more slips. I'm bankin' on you to see to it that there aren't. Like I said, we want to round up the whole gang tonight, and not spill no more blood doin' it.

"Well, we've already got Nick Dillworth, thanks to his comin' here to put over a fast one on you. He'll stay tied right where I've put him, until somebody cuts him loose, so we don't have to worry about him. But Floyd and Barwood are something else again, and that's where we've got to move mighty careful.

"They ducked out of Sterlington ahead of me this mornin', and headed the other way, makin' direct for Silver Bend. None of the local lawmen know that they was in on the hold-up job, as it happens; you heard what Bob Christie said. But Floyd won't dare take it for granted that nobody spotted 'em, or that they can't be connected with that ruckus in some way. So it's a hundred to one shot that he and Barwood won't stay at the Bend. They'll keep right on goin', and then hole up until they find out for certain just what did happen at the bank while they was blowin' town. And they'll hole up in their regular hide-out, back of the Devil's Skillet, where there's a couple more crooks that we want, waitin' for 'em."

"The Devil's Skillet?"

"Yes. The way in—the Handle—there's that canyon that opens off the Dust Pan trail about a mile below your well, here."

"I know the place, of course. But, Red, I thought—"

"You thought the Skillet was just a deep hole in the ground, with nothin' but bare rocks all around it and in it—a sort of jumpin' off place to nowhere? That's what everybody but the Dillworth bunch thought—which is why the law never could catch up with 'em! It's easy enough to get down into the Skillet itself. You can even ride a hawss down the slope from the Handle, if you know just where to turn, and zigzag back and forth. But nobody ever does ride a hawss down there, 'cause what's the use of ridin' into a hole for the sake of havin' to ride out again?

"When you've got to the bottom, all the rocks look alike. But there's two of 'em, all of a hundred feet tall and runnin' up almost to a needle point, 'way at the back of the Skillet, opposite the place where the Handle comes in. They're just wide enough apart for a man to ride between 'em. If he does, there's another face of rock in front of him. He turns to the right, keeps on as far as he can go, then turns to the left, and then to the right again, alternatin', the fourth turn'll take him clear of the rocks, right into a big hollow scooped out of the solid cliff itself!

"It can't be seen from the Handle, or anywhere above, because there's a great shelf of rock that overhangs it, like the eaves of a house. A man could stand on the top of that shelf, and never suspicion that there was an open space, big enough to hold a herd of cows, right under his feet!

"Well, that's the Dillworth hide-out. Floyd and his own particular bunch have used it for years. There's a spring where they get all the water they need, and they've packed in a store of food and plenty of feed for their hawsses. They could stay hid there for weeks, with a dozen posses out after 'em, and nobody guess that they was within a thousand miles.

"Now, if I haven't miscalculated, Floyd and Spider Barwood'll be on their way there now, comin' around the Thumb and up the valley from Silver Bend. I'm goin' to try to head 'em off; if I can, I'm goin' to keep 'em from ever gettin' into the hideout. The best way'll be for me to go afoot."

"Oh, no, no!" Molly Manning's heart cried out. It seemed to her that she could not bear to let him expose himself to this new danger. But, aloud, she only said quietly:

"Why not take my horse, Red? Or ride Nick Dillworth's?"

"Because I can't risk some of that posse hearin' me go and takin' after me. They might gun me, you know. Or, in case Floyd was on the valley trail, comin' up toward the handle, scare him so's he'd turn back and we'd lose him again. I found a short cut the other day that even the gang doesn't know about, and I won't have to go through that Handle canyon at all. I cross the flat, and climb up over the ridge and, the way the land lies from here, I'll save four-fifths of the distance. Only I've got to move lively, or Floyd and Barwood'll get to the hide-out before I do. Once they're inside, it'll be one sweet-scented job gettin' 'em out again!

"I want you to give me a start of, say, an hour. You go up to the well, and stay with Tom Brent. Some of my men'll be comin' down through the Dust Pan before long; they'd ought to have been here before this. When they come, you see George Alexander. You'll recognize him, all right; he's a big fellow, with a lot of blond curly hair and a voice you can hear a mile off. Explain to him that I've told you who I am; tell him where I've gone and why. Tell him to join forces with Bob Christie and sashay along down the trail to the Skillet. I hope I'll have a couple of prisoners ready to turn over to him when he gets there. But don't let anybody start under an hour, else our plans are liable to get upset again, and we can't afford that. Now, have you got it all straight, Molly?"

"Yes, I think so, Red. And I'll do exactly as you say. But, oh, Red, why do you have to face Floyd and Barwood alone? Why not call Bob Christie now, and explain to him yourself?"

Red Mundy answered her question by asking another.

"Molly, if you hadn't liked me a lot, would you have believed me when I told you I wasn't the real Red Mundy?"

"I—why, I don't know, Red. Maybe not. I'm not sure."

"Well," dryly, "Bob Christie doesn't like me, even a little bit, and some of those fellers he's got with him'd rather put a hole through me than eat breakfast in the mornin'. They wouldn't take my word for it nor yours that I'm a Federal officer; they'd think I'd just stolen my badge. But they'll certainly have to take George Alexander's word."

"Suppose this George Alexander doesn't believe me, though?"

"He will. You tell him right at the start that I've identified myself to you. Here; mebbe you'd better show him this." Red released one of her hands and, in a moment, pressed a small, heavy metal object into it. "My badge," he explained. "Show that to George, but don't you let it out of your possession for a second; hang onto it until you hand it back to me. Until George knows what's what, and why I've had to change all the plans for the original set-up, he'll play dumb, for fear of givin' my game away. Officially, I'm still an outlaw, with a price on my head!"

"But couldn't you wait until your own men come, Red? Wait here with me, and not try to play a lone hand? I'm so afraid, afraid something might —happen to you, Red." Her voice broke a little. "I don't want to be a baby, honestly, but I—I—"

"A baby? You? You're the bravest girl I've ever known! And the sweetest and best! And I'm the luckiest feller this side of Jordan that you care enough about me to worry whether I have to play a lone hand or not. But you aren't to be afraid, honey; I'll be all right. Only, I can't wait any longer for George. I don't know just when he'll get here. Might be half an hour or more. Like I said, he's overdue now. And I've got to head Spider Barwood and Floyd before they get into that hide-out. If I can beat 'em to it, it'll mean all the difference between a routine arrest and mebbe a bloody battle,

with half a dozen lives lost. You understand?"

"I suppose so, but—"

"Honey, I ought to have started before this. You wouldn't keep me, when you know I've got to go? Tell me 'So long,' and wish me luck, won't you? I'll be back!"

"Oh, Red—my dear, my dear!" Her arms went up and around his neck, clung there, while she yielded herself wholly to the ecstasy of his kiss. He held her close against him for a moment.

"Say it, sweetheart," he whispered. "Say it for me, just once before I go. Say, 'Red, I love you.' "

"Red, I—I love you," very low, but with a deep intensity of emotion that awed and humbled her by its very strength. "And you will take care of yourself, Red?"

"I'll take care of myself, honey girl; don't you fret. I've got a better reason for takin' care of myself than I ever had before!"

She could still feel the pressure of his parting kiss, passionate, possessive, tender, warm on her lips, as, with his characteristic noiseless tread, he vanished into the darkness around the corner of the shack.

CHAPTER XX

Disaster

FOR WHAT seemed a long time after he had gone, Molly stood leaning against the door of the shack, her face turned toward the soft little breeze that came whispering up out of the south, to brush her cheek with a warm, light touch that was like the lingering caress of a lover's fingers.

It was as if she were under the spell of some exquisite enchantment, and she was reluctant to move, to break it. Those brief, precious moments, filled with a poignant happiness such as she had never thought to know, already seemed like a dream; but a dream from which she had not wholly awakened. If she kept her eyes closed, she might, for a little while, hold and cherish the beauty of it. When she opened them, the enchantment and the dream would be gone, and she would again be face to face with a reality that was harsh and ugly and taut with a terrifying suspense. . . .

But something was hurting her hand. It was the badge Red had given her. She had closed her fingers so tightly over it that the edges of the heavy metal were cutting into her palm. She drew a long, unsteady breath that was almost a sob, and opened her eyes.

Go up to Tom Brent, at the well, he had said. But she couldn't climb over the rough, sharp rocks on the hill terraces while wearing house moccasins. She would have to put on her boots—and her boots were in her bedroom. She shrank from the ordeal of going into that room alone. Nick Dillworth was there.

"Come; snap out of it!" she admonished herself sternly. "Red said you were brave, didn't he? It takes a lot of courage to walk into a room where a man's tied hand and foot, doesn't it? Get on with the job you promised to do, and quit being an idiot!"

Resolutely, she opened the door of the shack, walked with a quick, firm tread across the front room. It was neat and orderly, except for the still uncleared table, and pleasant with mellow lamp-light. She would not let herself hesitate about drawing aside the curtains screening her bedroom; but she did make one small concession to her nervousness: she held them back, while she stooped to pick up her riding boots that were on the floor by the wall.

And then she wished she hadn't. Because if she had let the curtains fall into place, she would have been in darkness, and she wouldn't have seen Nick Dillworth's eyes. The stout wooden chair to which he was bound was

pushed close up to the other side wall, near the foot of her bed. He was nothing but a squat, formless shape—except for his eyes. Above the broad band of cloth that covered the lower part of his face, they glared at her, small, bright, glittering, red eyes. Eyes that hated her; followed her.

She sat down at the edge of the porch and changed her moccasins for the boots, then started quickly across the sandy flat, following the ruts made by Tom Brent's wagon. She had nearly reached the upward slope of the first terrace when a descending lantern winked out from behind a boulder, bobbed toward her.

"Is that you, Tom?" she called softly.

"Sure is, Molly." The old man hobbled to her side. "Where the devil do you think you're goin,' anyways? Wantin' to get yourself took for a bandit and shot, huh?"

"I was going up to the well, Tom. I wanted to speak to you."

"Well, I'm here. And it's a good thing I come down. Goin' up to the well!" He snorted. "The very idea! And that posse so jumpy they're liable to lam away at their own shadows! You come right along back to the shack and do your speakin' to me there."

It was better to tell him now than to argue with him. She knew she could trust him. As briefly as possible, she explained what had happened, repeated exactly what Red Mundy had told her. The old man listened without comment until she had come to the end of her recital. Then he grunted in what was evidently high satisfaction.

"So it wasn't a bandit we picked us, after all, Molly!" he said. "Mebbe I ain't so old as I thought I was! Anyways, this news of yours sure makes me feel about twenty years younger, by Godfrey damn, it does! I knowed in my bones that young feller was on the square, and I never ought to've believed anything else.

"Now, what's this big hombre's name—George Alexander? All right. You go back to the cabin and get your scatter-gun. Keep an eye on Dillworth. Soon as Alexander shows up, I'll get him and Christie and haze 'em down. You can show 'em the badge and clear up any details they want to know about. Now trot along, before some of them dumb deputies thinks I'm talkin' to a thousand dollars reward. and gets the itch in his trigger finger!"

Obediently, Molly turned and retraced her steps across the flat. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the gleam of the old man's lantern bobbing among the boulders on the lower slope. Fine spray from the tossing fountain high overhead made a misty rainbow about the glass globe. The air was moist, cooler than she had ever known it to be in the Dust Pan Valley; and the whole hillside seemed stirring, alive with the murmur and plash of running water.

She slowed her steps involuntarily as she approached the shack. She had an odd feeling that she didn't want to go near it. But that was absurd, of course. It was ridiculous of her to be so nervous, when there was nothing whatever—there—to be nervous about. She walked around the corner of the porch, and stopped suddenly, catching both hands to her breasts.

Floyd Dillworth stood within a yard of her, the light from the door, which he had partly opened, falling full on his bold, heavy-featured face. Beyond him, just visible at the farther edge of the yellow fan of lamplight, was another man, mounted, whom Molly had never seen before. She got no distinct impression of him, only that his body seemed very long and lean.

"Why, Molly!" Floyd Dillworth said, and pulled off his tall, steeple-crowned white sombrero to bow to her. His sleek black hair, brushed straight away from his forehead without a parting, glistened as if it had been oiled. "So there you are! I knocked, and when you didn't answer, I was just goin' to open the door and call, to ask was you all right. You

know Mr. Barwood, here, don't you?"

Molly murmured something; Spider Barwood mumbled something. Floyd went on, his genial smile showing his pointed canine teeth:

"You know, I've been away for a spell, and when I got back to the Bend yesterday, I heard how a couple of bad hats had been round here, talkin' to you outa turn. Well, I settled with one of 'em; he won't do no more talkin'; and the same goes for anybody who tries that caper, any time. Ary hombre thinks he can get away with botherin' you'll have me to reckon with, see?"

"Why, thank you, Floyd," Molly said; and, surprisingly, her voice sounded perfectly natural and tranquil. "It's very kind of you to take such a friendly interest in me."

"I wouldn't call it just a friendly interest," Floyd said, stressing the adjective. "But I sure do take it! I wasn't just easy in my mind about you, out here alone, while I was off on my trip, and it makes me feel a heap better to see you lookin' so well."

"Thank you," said Molly again. "But I haven't been alone, you know, Floyd. Tom Brent has been with me right along."

"A old cripple ain't much protection for a girl like you, Molly; specially when she's got somethin' that other folks'd like mighty well to have! That's another reason why I thought I'd best come over and see for myself how you was gettin' on."

"I'm getting on very well indeed, Floyd. Busy, of course—"

"Pop ain't been makin' a nuisance of himself, has he?"

Before Molly could answer the question, there was the sound of quick footsteps behind her, and the deputy, Buck Larrabee, his hand on his gun-butt, came around the corner of the shack.

"Oh, hello, Floyd!" said he. "So it's you, is it?" He squinted across the beam of light at Spider Barwood. "Hello, Barwood!"

"Hello yourself," returned Floyd, rather grumpily. He did not relish the interruption, and he didn't care whether Larrabee knew it or not. "What do you think you're doin' down in this neck of the woods—and sneakin' 'round in the night, huh?"

"Only my duty, Floyd; nothin' else but," Buck Larrabee assured him, with a slyly meaningful smirk. "No reason a-tall for you to get in a lather! I'm patrollin' this here well. They's a whole bunch of us guardin' that water, to keep Red Mundy from wettin' his whistle, and layin' to pitch him off if he tries it. But Miss Manning'll have told you all about that, of course. I sure wasn't intendin' to horn in on your taty-tate, Floyd."

Vitally interested though Floyd Dillworth was in the fate of Red Mundy, he gave no indication that he had ever heard of the man, and wholly ignored Buck Larrabee's remarks about him.

"I bet you wasn't!" he said. "You know me better'n to try it! But you still ain't told me what it was fetched you here."

"Why, I thought I heard a hawss on the trail yonder," the deputy explained. "You understand, we're bein' mighty careful, and I had to make sure everything was O.K., what with the young lady bein' here all by herself. What I heard must've been you and Barwood comin' up; but I got the notion the hawss was goin' away, and I thought your old man had went home quite a while earlier." He turned to Molly. "Mr. Dillworth goin' to send you them extry hands in the mornin', is he, ma'am?"

"Yes," the girl replied, "he promised to see to it."

"What's that?" Floyd Dillworth interposed sharply. "Pop's been here this evenin'? You didn't tell me that, Molly!"

"I hadn't," Molly said, smiling, "much time to tell you anything, you know, Floyd. You've only just gotten here."

"But I asked you— Say, what did Pop want of you?"

"He wanted me to sell him my well," she answered shortly.

"Yeah? So that's his game, is it? But you didn't do it?"

"Certainly I didn't."

"And certainly you ain't goin' to! I'll have a little somethin' to say to him when I see him! How long's he been gone?"

Molly laughed. It was a very creditable little laugh, quite gay and cheerful.

"Why, I couldn't say exactly. Fifteen or twenty minutes, perhaps. What is this, Floyd, a cross-examination? You ought to have been a lawyer, instead of a cowman!"

"Hmm," Floyd muttered, scowling. "Fifteen or twenty minutes, huh? Damn funny we didn't meet him on the trail, then! If I thought he deliberately—" He transferred his scowl to Buck Larrabee. "Well, feller, you seen your duty and you done it," he said rudely. "You ain't come to call on Miss Manning, and I have, so you can just be—"

He stopped in mid-sentence as, from inside the shack, came a dull, crashing thud. The floor boards of the porch vibrated, as if under a solid impact. Floyd and Spider Barwood exchanged quick glances. The eyes of the deputy leaped to the girl, scoring her with open distrust and suspicion.

"Old Nick's gone and Tom Brent's up at the well," he rapped. "Then who the hell's makin' that racket in your house?"

(*To be continued in the next issue*)

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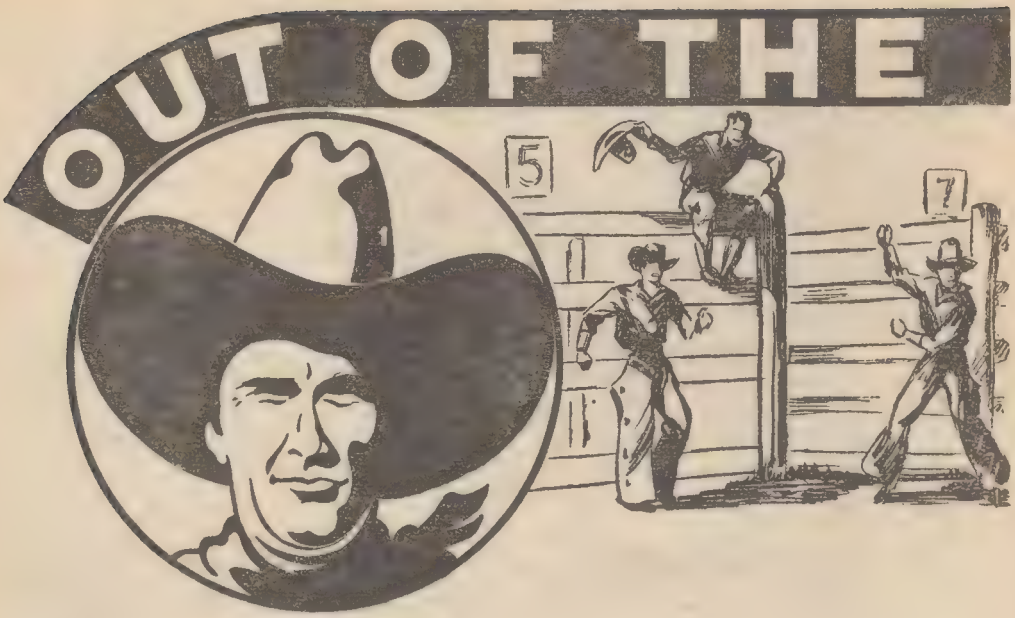


Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant and judge himself.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

DOT VERNON, who retired from the rodeo game at the height of her fame to run a ranch with her husband, gives us some first-hand news of some of the West Coast rodeos.

Madrone, Calif., put on a one-day show to a record-breaking crowd. All the contestants were local boys, so you can imagine the cheering. One hundred seventy-six cowboys and cowgirls from neighboring ranches vied for the prizes put up by various local businessmen. Tim Sullivan directed the arena, and the contests were judged by Harry Breen and T. J. Kirby.

Jack Millerick's string of bucking broncs and wild steers made things plenty rough and tumble for the Gilroy, Calif., Rodeo contestants. Pinky Gist, with his famous comedy mules, put on a grand piece of riotous clowning. Incidentally, Pinky's daring in the arena has saved many a cowboy from serious injury. As you probably know, it's Pinky's trick to attract the attention of an enraged brute to himself and away from the hapless cowpoke.

Sam J. Garrett, of Burbank, Calif., is about the oldest trick roper in the game, but he's just as good today as he was twenty-five years ago. It's said along the Coast that Sam is either getting his drinking water from the fountain Ponce de Leon set out across the ocean to find, or else he's nipping around among the life-giving herbs the Indians are said to nibble.

A newcomer in the trick-roping game—that is, he's a newcomer compared to Sam Garrett—is Paul St. Croix. He's fast becoming a West Coast favorite, with his handsome wardrobe and his ability to put over his act.

Two up and coming relay riders are Joe Malloy and Mike Sheldon. They are fast and furious, and their change of saddles makes lightning look as if it were just creeping along. These cowpokes walked off with most of the money in the relay races at the Gilroy show.

On my way out to California recently, I dropped into Las Vegas, N. M., to see the rodeo there. Some exceptionally fine time was made in the calf-roping by local contestants. Bob Weeks, of Logan, N. M., and Shorty Valdez, of Wilcox, Ariz., tied in the calf-roping finals, both boys roping and tying three calves in 53.2.

Jack Hitson, of Fort Sumner, N. M., walked away with the final *dinero* in the steer-wrestling event. He threw his three brutes in 38 seconds flat.

This Las Vegas show is, in a sense, a memorial to the late Tex Austin, because it was in that city he staged his first rodeo—long before he became the greatest producer of them all.

Holbrook, Ariz., is right in the heart of

the Navajo and Hopi Indian country, and thousands of Indians are dusting off their war feathers to wear at the coming rodeo there. One of the Navajo rodeo sports is known as a chicken pulling contest, which isn't as cruel as it sounds. Only dummy chickens are used. They are planted in the ground, and the Indian buck rides past at top speed, stooping to snatch the chicken from the earth. It's a fine art, too. Don Nesbitt, well known rodeo contestant, will direct the Holbrook arena.

The Earl of Egmont officially opened the Black Diamond, Alta., Stampede. Those Canadian cowpokes put on an excellent show and the judges—Joe Fisher, Don Thompson and Neil Campbell—had a hard time deciding final winners. Jack Sherman put on the best ride at this rodeo, and he also won the bronc-riding finals. Pat Nichols directed events with speed and gusto.

All the menfolk of Renton, Wash., are being urged not to shave until the coming three-day rodeo. Then they are supposed to dress up in old-style cowboy clothes—with their long silky beards, presumably, flowing down to cover their hip-slung sixguns. All the waitresses will be dressed as cowgirls or in old-time prairie costumes.

Rose Wahl will furnish Renton its bucking stock. She is the widow of the late "Strawberry Red" Wahl, one of the greatest broncriders of all times. Buff Brady is scheduled to be in charge of all stock, as well as trick-ride and trick-rope as an extra feature. It all sounds very gala.

The Prescott, Ariz., Rodeo drew the greatest crowds in its history. Grace Sparks, who is the guiding genius of this outfit, deserves a great deal of credit for her capable efforts. Doc Pardee handled the arena events as well as Mike Stuart, former director, used to, and that's saying a lot. He also saw to it that all contestants received a share of the show's revenue. Now there's a man with a heart!

An innovation of the rodeo was the parimutuel machines used in the relay and other races. Whether this idea will spread to other rodeos or not, is anybody's guess—but the fans seemed to like it a lot.

When the noon crowds were thickest in the business section of Phoenix, Ariz., someone spotted a man on a hotel's roof. He teetered back and forth, as if he couldn't quite make up his mind to jump—and couldn't quite make up his mind not to. Brave men gasped, and women screamed.

"Look out! I'm going to jump," the man on the roof yelled. But before he did, some men, oddly enough members of the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, pled with him not to commit suicide. Their arguments didn't help.

"I've nothing to live for!" the would-be suicide cried, resisting all help.

Then someone offered him a bribe. Would he reconsider for a couple of tickets to the forthcoming rodeo? Well, he would, and he did, and nearly fell off reaching for the tickets!

It was all a publicity gag, of course—but it helped turn the trick.

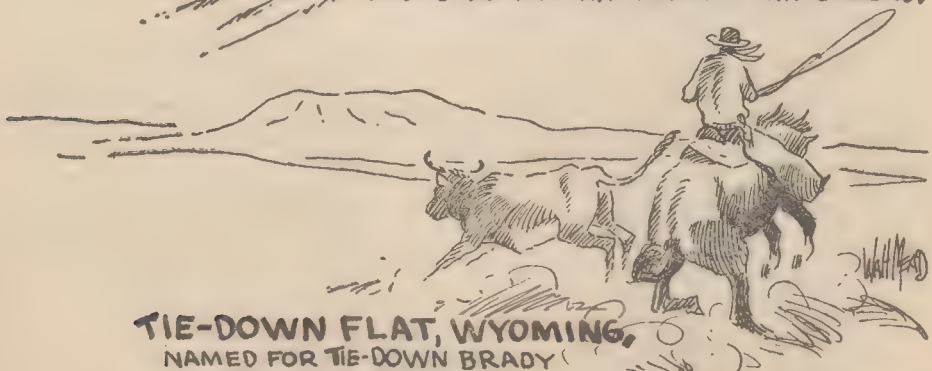
Adios,

Tex Sherman

Know Your West!

By Walt Mead

IN 1894 AT **THEROPOLIS**, WYOMING, **KID CURRIE** AND HIS GANG HELD UP **ED ENDERLY'S** STORE.
THE ONE CARRYING THE MONEY HAD TO GRAB HIS SADDLE HORN AS HIS HORSE BEGAN BUCKING. **LATER**, SEVEN HUNDRER AND SIXTY-FIVE DOLLARS WAS FOUND ON THE GROUND.



TIE-DOWN FLAT, WYOMING.
NAMED FOR TIE-DOWN BRADY
BECAUSE OF HIS HANDINESS IN TYING DOWN STOCK AND REBRANDING THEM TO SUIT HIMSELF.

Editor's Note—This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish original pieces of cartoons or verse or prose. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence about your contributions. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

The Rancher's Lament

The cowboys are lazy, the seasons gone crazy,
Beef prices have taken a drop;
With wages so high, we can hardly get by,
It looks like our plans are a flop;
We thought that this year would see us in the clear,
But it's left us with naught but a frown;
We had fed all our hay before New Year's day;
Let's sell out and move into town.

We had thought in September, grass would last till December,
But a prairie fire burned up the range;
And I'll always remember how it snowed in November,
So our planning we had to exchange;
The old cows got sick, and they died mighty quick;
Their carcasses are strewn all around;
The calves got so thin, they are just bones and skin;
We might as well move into town.

The horses have distemper, which will seriously hamper
Our plans for the plowing this spring;
The bank's going to foreclose us; Ma's got halitosis
I wonder what next fate will bring.
Hens killed by the weasels, and the kids have the measles;
There's an epidemic of small-pox around;
The chickens won't lay near enough eggs to pay;
Let's pull up and move into town.

We had thought with our spuds to buy some new duds,
But the frost got 'em all late in June;
The old car is busted and I'm plumb disgusted;
I'll give up the fight pretty soon.
But in town to our grief we'd be forced on Relief,
And our head would forever hang down;
Though the taxes are due, and the mortgage is, too,
I'll be damned if we'll move into town!

Leslie J. Arnes, Aptos, Calif.

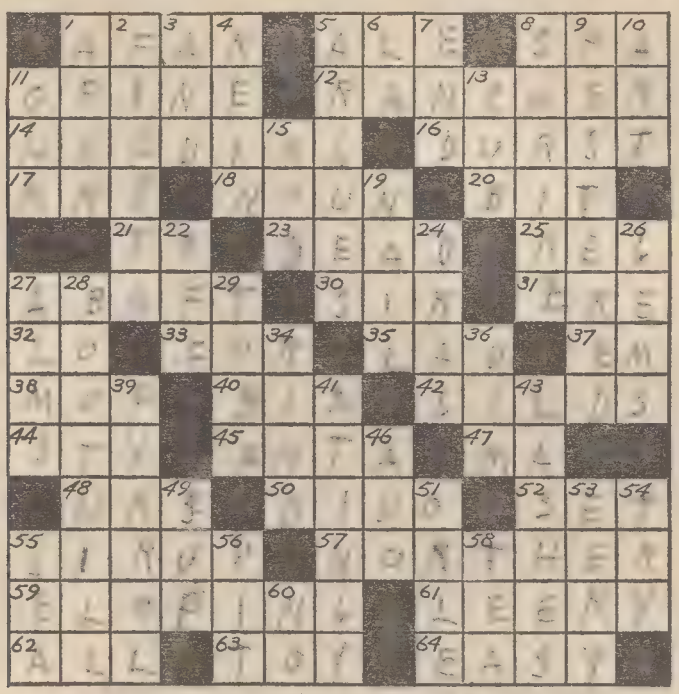
"I allus thought Ma said, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try a gun'."

E. Waller, Washington, D. C.

Honorable Mention

Virginia Goodwin, Groton, Mass.
Margaret Weise, Giddings, Tex.
Joyce Patrick, Butte, Mont.
Bobby Wickersham, Cooper, Tex.

. The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle .



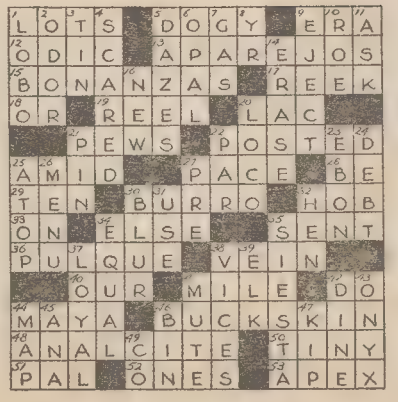
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

Across

1. In the distance
5. A beverage
8. A watering place
11. To think; suppose
12. One who ranches
14. Noticing
16. Dared
17. Mistress (Abbr.)
18. The name of a person, place, or thing
20. A bridle mouthpiece
21. A preposition
23. Lifeless
25. A small barrel
27. Behind (Nautical)
30. A title of respect
31. Before
32. Behold
33. A pelt
35. A small boy
37. A printers' measure
38. To wash floors
40. Twice (Music)
42. Coats with gold
44. A pig pen
45. The tapir
47. Mother
48. Hours (Abbr.)
50. A caper
52. To place
55. A sweet liquid
57. A storm from the north
59. Running away
61. Suspicious
62. The whole amount
63. A plaything
64. Not difficult

Down

1. An imitator
2. A festival
3. A conjunction
4. A bridle strap
5. Debates
6. A note of the scale
7. To finish
8. A kind of thrush
9. Annoyed
10. Skill in performance
11. The unit of resistance
13. A baby bear
15. To bow the head
19. To fasten
22. Not on
24. A cowboy's position
26. Precious stones
27. Charitable gifts
28. A Western cemetery
29. A musical instrument
34. The outer shell
36. Indistinct
39. An alkaloid chemical
41. Miserly
43. Whips
46. Hurry; bustle
49. To take food
51. A heraldic bearing
53. Weird
54. To attempt
55. The ocean
56. A deep hole
58. A beverage
60. A negative



Solution to Third October puzzle

Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more new members to welcome into your club:

Private D. Allen, H.Q. Co., 2/H.L.I., British Troops, Palestine
Miss M. Allon, 28 Chelsea St., New Basford, Nottingham, England
Miss Betty Aure, P. O. Box 91, Bellevue, Wash.
Miss Marylyn Bennett, 615 Wheaton Rd., Fort Sam Houston, Tex.
Miss Lorraine Berkins, 4412 Garfield So., Minneapolis, Minn.
Mr. Albert Bliss, 132-02 Hillside Ave., Richmond Hill, N. Y.
Miss Chinia Boone, 12 Milk St., Asheville, N. C.
Miss Tex Brandes, 326 E. 123 St., New York City, N. Y.
Mrs. Beatrice Brown, 418 Cherry St., Chattanooga, Tenn.
Mr. Clifford Burshek, Box 864, Miles City, Mont.
Mr. Alfred Carter, Co. 1530, Lancaster, Ohio
Mr. J. Chapman, 5 Wansunt Rd., Bexley, Kent, England
Mr. Steve Cihart, Box 295, La Porte, Tex.
Mr. James R. Clifton, R. 2, Bertram, Tex.
Miss Laverne Clifton, R. 2, Bertram, Tex.
Mrs. Agnes Coberly, Davisville, W. Va.
Miss Virginia Combs, Box 907, Crandon, Wisc.
Mr. Jim Corbett, Box 126, Atascadero, Calif.
Mr. John Cornelius, R. 4, Albertville, Ala.
Miss Margie Correa, Puunene, Maui, Hawaii
Miss Helen L. Crawford, R. 3, Waterloo, N. Y.
Miss Nytha Cutlip, 62 E. Market St., Tiffin, Ohio
Mrs. Edna Doughman, 4182—20th St., San Francisco, Calif.
Miss Mae Dunderland, R. 1, Box 67, Bottineau, N. D.
Mr. R. N. C. Ekeke, St. Paul's School, Ohambele, P. O. Box 11, Aba, Nigeria
Miss Monteen Faulkner, Tuscola, Tex.
Mrs. Florence Fortier, Box 581, Groveton, N. H.
Private Donald Foster, 2nd Batt., The Ware Regt., Kuldana, Muree Hills, Muree, Punjab, India
Miss Irene Gee, Davison, Mich.
Mr. Douw Gerber, 11 Grouse St., Cottesloe, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa
Mr. C. H. Glisson, Jr., Panama City Hospital, Panama City, Fla.
Miss Jean Greiner, R. 3, Wetaskiwin, Alta., Canada
Miss Natalie Gutierrez, Lake County Sanatarium, Crown Point, Ind.
Mrs. Martha Hamilton, 10 Kennedar Drive, Linthouse, Glasgow, S. W. 1, Scotland
Miss Valerie Hart, 226 Wulfstan St., East Acton, W. 12, England
Private R. Haskayne, 18/3rd Fld. Regt., Trimulgherry, Deccan, India
Miss Barbara Hazard, 77 Loring St., Lowell, Mass.
Mr. E. G. Houston, Main St., Matabiele, E. G. Land, South Africa
Mr. Abraham Ishmael, c/o A. Tenenta, Post and Tele., Aba, West Africa
Mr. Friday Ishmael, Government School, Aba, West Africa
Nurse Ann Jackson, County Mental Hosp., Winwick, Warrington, Lancashire, England
Private Jenkins, 1st Batt., S. W. Borderers, N. W. F. P., Landi Kotal, India
Mr. Eric Karlson, 1004 Lillian St., Hobart, Ind.
Mrs. Anthony Kazounis, 80 South Cherry St., Poughkeepsie, N. Y.
Mrs. Frieda Kennedy, 4002 W. Okmulgee Ave., Muskogie, Okla.
Mr. Desmond Kietzmann, c/o J. Baubermanns, Private Bay, East London, South Africa
Miss Charlotte Kimball, Box 143, Wilsonville, Conn.
Miss Doris King, 41 Aiken St., Bristol, Gloucester, England
Private William Kirwan, 10th Air Base Squad., Chanute Field, Rantoul, Ill.
Mr. J. Poe Klerk, Welgedeel, P. O. Heilbron, Orange Free State, South Africa
Miss Edna Kolb, 135 Green Ave., Sayville, N. Y.
Mr. Gilbert Lane, Rosboro, Ark.
Mr. Allen Larrington, Chariton, Iowa
Miss Ruth Leary, 1289—1st Ave., N., Park Falls, Wisc.
Mr. Sydney Leigh, Etomami, Sask., Canada
Mr. Dale Livingston, Woodston, Kans.
Miss Naomi Luttenberger, 1079 Line St., Easton, Penna.
Miss Marguerite McDonell, Box 213, Choteau, Mont.
Miss Belvah Maguire, Box 705, Groveton, N. H.
Mr. Charles McGill, Forked River, N. J.
Mr. Joe Maher, 7—7 Route H. de Sieyes, Shanghai, China
Mr. Edward Weber, P. O. Kayzenber, via Mamre Rd., Cape Prov., South Africa
Mrs. S. F. Westbrook, Trion, Ga.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.
I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(Miss)

(Mrs.)

(Mr.)

Address .....

City .....

State .....

This coupon makes you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

Please *print* your name and adress plainly. 11-10-39

"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES in all parts of the world. Its purpose is to help readers make friends with people everywhere, near and far, at home and abroad.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter you find printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those people who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing practical jokes, and particularly ask you not to sign letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison, New York City, N. Y.

Six Feet Eight Inches Tall?

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely young man of thirty, and would like to exchange letters with young ladies and young men of my own age. I'll exchange photos, also, and can tell some interesting things about this city. I have brown hair and brown eyes, and am six feet, eight inches tall.

Sincerely,
JULIUS BERNHARD.

3827 Superba St.,
San Diego, Calif.

Fill Her Mail Box

Dear Editor:

I am a young girl of fourteen, with golden-brown hair and blue eyes, and my hobby is collecting stamps and snapshots. I'll gladly exchange either of these with anyone. I'd like to hear from CCC boys and soldiers between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. I hope they'll hurry to fill my mail box, as I am very lonely.

Sincerely,
MAXINE McINTIRE.

615½ North Tower,
Centralia, Wash.

Southern Girl

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely Southern girl and would like some pen pals. I enjoy all sports and shows, and just love to write letters. I'll exchange snapshots with all who care to do so.

Sincerely,
THELMA HILL.

148 West Jeff. Davis Ave.,
Montgomery, Ala.

Young Daredevil

Dear Editor:

Here comes a young daredevil who likes danger and adventure in any shape or form. I am going on eighteen, and would like very much to hear from all you other lonely correspondents in any part of the world. My hair is dark brown, and my eyes are gray.

Sincerely,
LEO SMITH.

23, Cameron Ave.,
New Glasgow, N. S.,
Canada

Well Traveled

Dear Editor:

I am twenty-nine years old, and have spent three years in the navy visiting Hawaii, Panama, Cuba, Trinidad, France, Norway, Scotland and Germany. I've been collecting stamps for the last year, and would like to exchange some with pen pals. I am interested in hiking and baseball.

Sincerely,
WALLACE DAUGHERTY.

60½ Sixth Ave., S.,
Seattle, Wash.

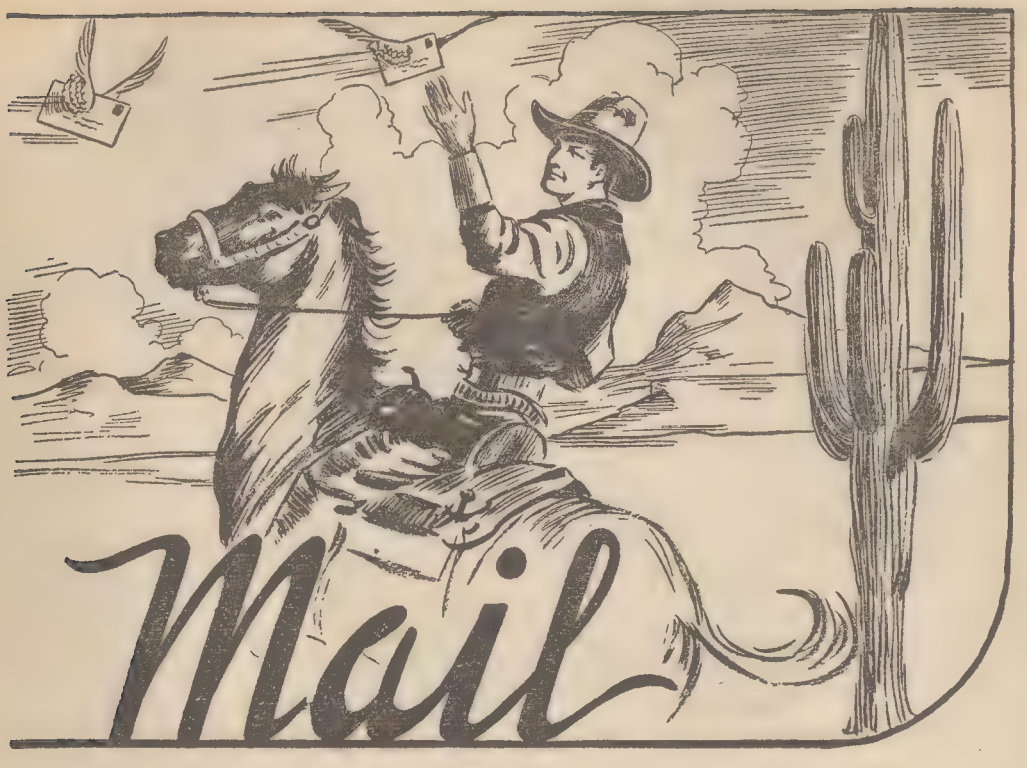
She Collects Post Marks

Dear Editor:

I am a fifteen-year-old girl in a sanitorium, looking for pen pals. I am five feet tall and have brown hair and eyes. My hobby is collecting post marks.

Sincerely,
MIRIAM WILKERSON.

Ward 112,
Olive View, Calif.



Want a World's Fair Folder?

Dear Editor:

I am hoping to secure some genuine friends through this letter. I have been a constant reader of RANCH ROMANCES for a long time, and I consider it tops in real reading entertainment. I am a bachelor, not forty nor fat, interested in football, fishing and hunting. I am an ex-sailor, and have traveled extensively. I will send a souvenir folder of the World's Fair in New York to anyone interested.

Sincerely,
R. BRUCE MacROBERTSON.

121 Westchester Ave.,
White Plains, N. Y.

Liked "Teacher's Pet"

Dear Editor:

We have been reading your magazine for some time and enjoy the stories. We liked particularly "Teacher's Pet," by Cliff Walters. We would like to correspond with other readers. We are young Canadian girls, fond of animals and sports.

Sincerely,
BETTY MAE JACKSON,
ELEANOR REYNOLDS.

Metaskiwin,
Alta., Canada

One Thousand Songs

Dear Editor:

I am a widow in my thirties, and have over one thousand songs of various kinds which I am willing to copy for anyone who writes to me. I also have access to a great many other songs. I can also tell you about the West Coast beach towns. I am a brunette, an American, and five feet three inches tall. I have a steel guitar and a mandolin, as well as a phonograph and a radio, but none of these can take the place of pen pals. I am almost a shut-in, so would particularly like them.

Sincerely,
ESTHER E. PIERCE.

10610 S. McKinley Ave.,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Patient English Lass

Dear Editor:

This is my sixth or seventh attempt for pen pals. I have waited patiently. I am nineteen years young and would be all the happier with a few correspondents. I am interested in almost anything, and am a regular reader of R. R. So roll up! Everyone is welcome from near and far.

Sincerely,
FLORENCE NIXON.

3 Gorse Rd.,
Blackburn, Lancs.,
England

South African Indian

Dear Editor:

I have read R. R. for about three years. I have a dark complexion, brown eyes and black hair. I am fifteen years old, and my hobbies are movies, sports, and corresponding.

I am a South African Indian—not a red Indian, but a descendant of an Indian from India. My nickname is Gun.

Sincerely,
ABDULHAG KAFIE.

28 Ryde Ave., Durban,
Natal, South Africa

Many Hobbies

Dear Editor:

I am a young Norwegian boy, nineteen years old, who wants pen pals from all over the world. I am six feet one inch tall, have sandy hair, blue eyes.

My hobbies are foreign coins, relics, postcard views and snapshots. I play the guitar, clarinet and an accordian. I like Spanish and Hawaiian music very much, and would like to hear from others interested in music. I can tell you a lot about the Indians here.

I can truthfully say that R. R. is an ideal magazine for all ages from eight to eighty.

Sincerely,
ROY A. TWEDT.

Langford, S. D.

BACKACHE?

Try Flushing Excess Poisons And Acid Thru Kidneys And Stop Getting Up Nights

35 CENTS PROVES IT

When your kidneys are overtaxed and your bladder is irritated and passage scanty and often smarts and burns, you may need Gold Medal Haarlem Oil Capsules, a fine harmless stimulant and diuretic that starts to work at once and costs but 35 cents at any modern drugstore.

It's one good safe way to put more healthy activity into kidneys and bladder — you should sleep more soundly the whole night through. But be sure to get **GOLD MEDAL** — it's a genuine medicine for weak kidneys — right from Haarlem in Holland.

EXPOSE OF GAMBLERS SECRETS

New ways they read cards. Stop losing. Know dice exposes, missers and passers, also slot machine and punch board. New book "BEAT THE CHEAT," $1.00 copy. Add 25c for new 1939 catalog. Send $1.25 to
SPECIALTY EXPOSES, Box 2482, Kansas City, Mo.

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have. Make yourself free and happy with Tobacco Redeemer. Not a substitute, not habit forming. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and dependable, easy way to relieve the craving many men have.

Newell Pharmacal Co.
Dept. 600, St. Louis, Mo.

FREE BOOK

INVENTORS

TIME COUNTS — don't risk delay in patenting your invention. Write for new FREE Book: "Patent Guide for the Inventor" and "Record of Invention" form. No charge for preliminary information.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HYMAN BERMAN
Registered Patent Attorneys
1879 Adams Bldg., Washington, D. C.

CONFIDENTIAL TO MEN PAST 40

It is common knowledge in medical circles that thousands of men past 40 have prostate trouble. Thousands suffer annoying, embarrassing, and sometimes agonizing symptoms, such as frequent rising at night, pains in the back, neck, crotch and rectum, chronic tiredness and weakness. Most of these symptoms may be traced to inflammation and swelling of that important male gland, the prostate. Neglect may lead to serious consequences. Thermalaid method offers pleasant, soothing, comforting relief without painful massage, drugs or special diets. Thirty day trial offer, positive money-back guarantee. Our new free booklet: "Why Many Men Are Old at 40", explains everything. Write today.

THERMALAID METHOD, INC.,
4821 FRANKLIN AVE., STEUBENVILLE, OHIO

RANCH ROMANCES

Veteran in the CCC

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to find pen pals. I am a lonely veteran, forty-seven years old, and in the CCC. My favorite pastimes are camping, reading, music, and receiving letters. I am very lonely and would be glad to hear from people of all ages.

Sincerely,
CLYDE SOUTHWELL.

CCC Co. 2946,
Silverton, Ore.

For Ladies Only

Dear Editor:

I wish to exchange silk pieces for making quilts. I am a seamstress and have many nice pieces. I have just finished making my third silk quilt and now would like to get some different pieces. I also have a stamp collection and will exchange stamps via the Scott stamp catalog. Ladies only, please!

Sincerely,
MRS. J. L. STEINKE.

Box 285,
Okanogan, Wash.

Three Cavalrymen

Dear Editor:

We are three lonely Cavalrymen who would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. We promise interesting letters.

Sincerely,
CALVIN ESKEW,
ALVIN FERGUSON,
MARVIN CARROL.

Troop A, 7th Cav.,
Fort Bliss, Tex.

Three Roommates

Dear Editor:

We are three roommates, nineteen, twenty and twenty-one, who wish to correspond with some intelligent gentlemen. Our outside activities are limited and so we wish to make pen friends. We will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
LOU CONNER,
LUCILLE RIEDE,
EILEEN CARTER.

Avalon,
Mt. Vernon, Ohio

Lives Near Old Mexico

Dear Editor:

I am a Western girl, fifteen years old, and have dark brown hair and blue-gray eyes. I live in Bisbee, Ariz., exactly seven miles from the Border of Old Mexico, and can tell many interesting things. My chief sports are horseback riding and dancing; my hobby is stamp collecting.

Sincerely,
JANE PAQUIN.

Box 62,
Bisbee, Ariz.

Lucky Scotch Mascot

Dear Editor:

To all who write to me I will send a lucky Scotch mascot. I'm good-natured, even-tempered, like to cook and bake. I'm fond of out-of-doors life and all animals. I have brown eyes and auburn hair. Gentlemen over thirty, on land or sea, are welcome to write.

Sincerely,
MISS M. ALSTON.

45 Agnes St.,
North Kelvinside,
Glasgow, Scotland

Four Sisters on Route Four

Dear Editor:

We want pals from the four corners of the earth, regardless of age. We are four sisters with a lively sense of humor, and love to make friends and are interested in everything and everybody.

Sincerely,
LOIS TURNER,
CLARICE TURNER,
PAULINE TURNER,
LOLA TURNER.

R. 4,
Trenton, Tenn.

OUR AIR MAIL

Red Hair—Blue Eyes

Dear Editor:
I am thirty-one years old and have red hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from pen pals from about twenty-five to thirty-five. I love to write letters.

Sincerely,
CLEO PACE.

2827 Pine St.,
Dallas, Tex.

Wants to Be a Cartoonist

Dear Editor:
My ambition is to be a cartoonist. I am a lonely sixteen-year-old boy, tall and dark. I will exchange snaps with the first ten who write.

Sincerely,
RICHARD LLOYD.

R. 3,
Paris, Ark.

In German or English

Dear Editor:
Please publish my request for pen pals, especially for those who are interested in stamp collecting. I have duplicates to trade. I can answer either in English or German. I am thirty-three and an ex-service man.

Sincerely,
FRANK FERMENT.

729 E. Main St.,
Waupun, Wisc.

Kentucky Miss

Dear Editor:
I live in a very small town where there aren't many places to go. I get very lonesome. I am fifteen years old and have black hair and blue eyes. I hope my plea for pen pals isn't in vain.

Sincerely,
FAY UNTHANK.

R. 3,
Wallins Creek, Ky.

The Lone Star State

Dear Editor:
This is the third time we'd tried for pen pals. We are two CCC boys in the Lone Star State, and would like pals everywhere. We are between nineteen and twenty years of age.

Sincerely,
E. P. LAWSON,
ALTON POWELL.

CCC Co. 3811,
Lamesa, Tex.

In the Seventh Grade

Dear Editor:
I am twelve years old and in the seventh grade. I collect stamps. I would like to hear from children all over the world.

Sincerely,
RALPH WALKER.

Box 555,
Wapato, Wash.

A Pharmacist's Mate

Dear Editor:
I am a pharamacist's mate serving in the United States Navy. I am twenty-four years old and would like some nice girl to keep me from being lonely in exchange for some interesting letters.

Sincerely,
CARL L. JORGENSEN.

Fleet Air Base,
Sitka, Alaska

A Strange Hobby

Dear Editor:
Although I am a stenographer, my interest lies in railroad traffic. All forms of transportation interest me—even my lowly little bicycle. I have traveled only in the East and Middle West so far, and have one flying lesson to my credit.
Do you want to be my pen pal?

Sincerely,
LORAINE NELSON.

3642 - 15th Ave. S.,
Minneapolis, Minn.

Normal School Principal Finds N.I.A. Gives Real Service

"I have sold an article to Real America. Before enrolling I was skeptical of N.I.A. training as the best preparation for writing in fields other than newspaper reporting, but now I am convinced that you make good on your claim that N.I.A. is *the* preparation needed by writers in all fields. N.I.A. renders a real service by giving thorough, sincere and expert criticism."

E. L. MENDENHALL
253 Linden St., Fond du Lac, Wis.

Why Can't You Write?

It's much simpler than you think!

So many people with the "germ" of writing in them simply can't get started. They suffer from inertia. Or they set up imaginary barriers to taking the first step.

Many are convinced the field is confined to persons gifted with a genius for writing.

Few realize that the great bulk of commercial writing is done by so-called "unknowns." Not only do these thousands of men and women produce most of the fiction published, but countless articles on business affairs, social matters, domestic science, etc., as well.

Such material is in constant demand. Every week thousands of checks for $25, $50 and $100 go out to writers whose latent ability was perhaps no greater than yours.

The Practical Method

Newspaper work demonstrates that the way to learn to write is by writing! Newspaper copy-desk editors waste no time on theories or anicent classics. The *story* is the thing. Every copy "cub" goes through the course of practical criticism—a training that turns out more successful authors than any other experience.

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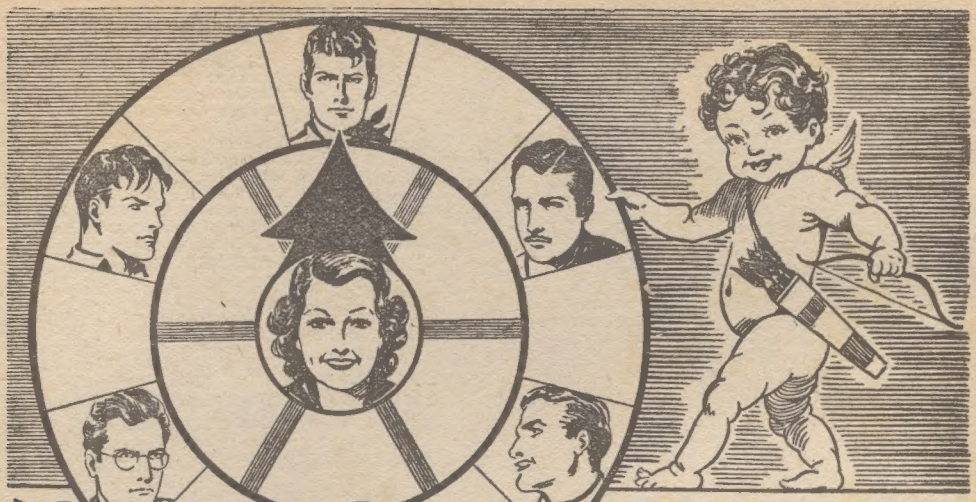

Whom Shall I Marry?

By Professor Marcus Mari

The Scorpio Girl

THE GIRL who is born between October 23rd and November 22nd has for her sun sign Scorpio, the eighth of the zodiac, symbolized by the scorpion. And the principal gift bestowed on her when she comes into the world is power. The influence she can exercise on those with whom she comes in contact is enormous. But whether this influence is used for good or evil depends entirely on herself.

She must always be searching her own heart to guard against unreasoning jealousy. She must always question her own motives, that they be neither unfair or selfish. She must look to it that her methods of getting those things which she wants are open and aboveboard. In other words, she must constantly rule herself; rule her marvelous gifts and not be ruled by them.

She has unusually keen perceptions; she understands people intuitively. She is apt to have a very pronounced love of literature—poetry especially. She is extremely sensitive and kindly at heart, and learns with amazing rapidity. She works fast and is conscientious and will make a success of almost any business. She is tactful, courteous and full of fun.

While not fickle, this girl is apt to be a flirt. She has a way with men and throughout her life she will have ardent, sincere admirers. She must be careful not to hurt people as she makes her care-free and merry way through life. She will find a perfect mate in a man who is, above all else, intelligent. He must understand her thoroughly and never try to remake her. He should have a good disposition and be somewhat stolid to overset her own impetuous personality. He may be born under the sign of Taurus or Capricorn, but almost any sign produces some man the Scorpio girl will get along with very well. She is, above all else, a man's woman.

She is not demonstrative, but her feelings go very deep. Her interest in anything is wholehearted and she is absolutely tireless, mentally and physically, when she puts her mind to it. She does not believe in half-measures.

She will make a laughing, care-free, industrious wife, full of the love of living.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends him this coupon in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Avenue, New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name_____ Sex_____

Address_____

Exact date of birth: Year_____ Month_____ Date_____ 11-10-39

In the next issue Professor Mari will analyze men born between October 23rd and November 22nd.

Believe It or Not! by Ripley

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7 diamond Cluster; half carat size. 6 other diamonds. 14K yellow gold.
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C. $32.50
Bridal Set with 10 Diamonds. Both rings 14K yellow gold.
$3.15 a month

D. $50
Sworn Perfect Diamond; 2 other diamonds; 14K yellow gold
$4.90 a month

E. $16.95
Man's Initial Ring; 2 initials and diamond on black onyx. 10K yellow gold. $1.60 a month.

G. $29.75
Ladies' Bulova watch, 17 jewels; 10K yellow Rolled gold plate case and bracelet.
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F. $19.95
Newest style 17 jewel Heart Watch in 10K yellow rolled gold plate with bracelet to match.
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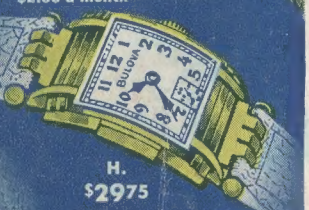

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Just a few words about the suggestions that I show here. Take ring (A), for instance. Imagine — only $29.50 for this pretty ring. And the Cluster Ring (B)—it looks like a half carat solitaire when worn on your finger. It's a beauty—I'm sure you would like it. The Bridal Ensemble (C) is really two rings for the ordinary price of one. If it's an Engagement Ring you want, I recommend (D)—it's a perfect diamond—I'll give you an Affidavit sworn to by a diamond expert before a Notary Public. Initial Ring (E) would delight any man. It's extra heavy and beautifully designed. My watch suggestions I am proud of. Bulova Watches are fine timekeepers and great values. The Kent Watches I show are priced exceptionally low and are the latest styles. My great feature is the Silverplate Set with Tablecloth and Napkins. I expect this to be one of my popular sellers — because of it's exceptionally low price.

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